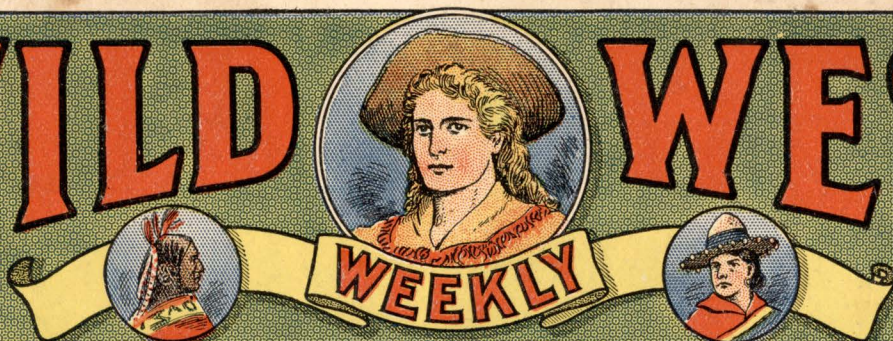


WILD WEST



A MAGAZINE CONTAINING STORIES. SKETCHES ETC. OF WESTERN LIFE.

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YOUNG WILD WEST AFTER THE DEATH BAND, OR, SAVING ARIETTA FROM THE SECRET CAVES.

By AN OLD SCOUT.



As the man started down the flight of stone steps with Arietta, Wild stepped from behind the niche. "I reckon you've gone far enough," he said, in a whisper, as he placed his hand on the leader's collar. "If the girl is not released instantly, you will die!"

WILD WEST WEEKLY

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YOUNG WILD WEST AFTER THE DEATH BAND

OR,

Saving Arietta from the Secret Caves

By AN OLD SCOUT.

CHAPTER I.

THE PECULIAR SMOKE AND THE PLACARD.

In one of the wildest parts of the mountains of New Mexico a thin column of sulphurous smoke was rising from a crevice that ran zig-zag across a big mass of rock that was almost cone-shaped.

It was in the spring of the year and the melting snow on the sunny side of the steep peaks ran down in tiny rivulets only to make the common purpose of meeting and forming a turbulent mountain stream that went dashing, seething downward to feed some creek, or else to be sucked up in the dry sands of some desert waste.

The column of smoke alluded to seemed strangely out of place to the party of riders, who saw it when they were yet a mile away from the spot.

The party alluded to consisted of Young Wild West, the dashing boy hero, who was known by many as the Prince of the Saddle, because of his skill and daring at breaking and riding wild horses, and who was the acknowledged Champion Deadshot of the West.

Much has been written about Young Wild West, so it is hardly necessary to give a detailed description of him.

Suffice it to say that though but a boy in years, he was a man in every other sense of the word. He had about attained his growth, was handsome and possessed the figure of a well-trained athlete, wore a wealth of light chestnut hair hanging below his shoulders, and invariably rode a splendid sorrel stallion which he called Spitfire.

His attire, which was a fancy hunting suit of buckskin, was always neat, for he had more than one, and took pleasure in keeping himself in shape. Often he went without the coat, and then he looked at ease in a costly blue silk shirt, which showed off his shapely shoulders and athletic form to the very best advantage.

Having struck it rich in the Black Hills when he was

but sixteen years of age, he had since that time, which was about two or three years, been enjoying life by riding about the wildest parts of the West, searching for adventure, and fortune, too, for he was always looking out for gold in the mining regions he passed through.

But adventure was his hobby, and the more thrilling it was, and the more dangers he came upon, the better it suited him.

As we find him at a halt on this delightful spring morning, watching the queer-looking smoke, he is accompanied by his two partners, Cheyenne Charlie and Jim Dart, and the three girls, who had been traveling with him for the past two years.

Cheyenne Charlie, like the boy himself, had been born and reared in Wyoming; hence he was what might be termed a real Westerner. He had let his dark hair grow until it came below his shoulders, and with a heavy mustache to set off his bronzed face, he was decidedly handsome.

He had put in several years as a scout for the Army, which made him a man of experience in Indian fighting. But he lacked the qualifications to be a leader, and when he found Young Wild West he came upon one whom he could follow, no matter where the path might lead.

Jim Dart was a boy chum of the dashing young deadshot, and though he never had a great deal to say, he was always on hand when wanted.

He, too, was a true boy of the Wild West. But it seemed that our hero had been born to be a leader, and his aggressiveness, and his determination to do the right thing, and put down the lawless bands that infested many parts of the West at the time of which we are writing, had given him a reputation that many a man old enough to be his grandfather would have been proud to own.

If the skill the boy possessed was unsurpassed—which was surely the case—his coolness, daring and excellent judgment could not be matched the world over.

No wonder then that Young Wild West was one whom the boys of America might well strive to emulate!

The girls we have mentioned were Arietta Murdock, the charming, golden-haired Western miss, who was the sweetheart of our hero; Anna, the wife of Cheyenne Charlie, and Eloise Gardner, the girl sweetheart of Jim Dart.

The latter two had not been reared in the West, but they had lived there a sufficient length of time to make them become used to its ways, and they had come to love the life they were living, with its varying scenes, pleasures, hardships, excitement and dangers.

Our friends were very well equipped for the life they were leading. Besides having an excellent camping outfit, and always making it a point to be well supplied with the provisions they needed, they had two Chinamen in their employ, one as a cook and the other as a "handy man."

These were brothers, named Wing Wah and Hop Wah. The former was the cook, and the latter the "handy man."

While they looked much alike, and were typical Chinamen, such as are to be found at the mining camps of today, there was as much difference between their temperaments and knowledge of things, as there is between a walnut and an oyster.

Wing was just a plain, every-day Chinaman, who was perfectly willing to do his share of the work, and then sit and doze when he had nothing to do. Hop, on the other hand, was the liveliest sort of a "heathen" that one would be apt to come across in a month's travel. He was an expert sleight-of-hand performer, a professional card sharp, a lover of practical joking and rather fond of whisky, which he always called tanglefoot.

But in spite of any bad habits he may have had, he had a warm spot in the hearts of Young Wild West and his friends.

This was because he had very often proved to be of the most valuable assistance to them.

He had, in fact, been the means—directly, too—of saving their lives, and all through his cleverness, for Hop was no fighter.

But of this later on.

As Young Wild West sat in the saddle, watching the thin column of sulphurous smoke that was rising from the top of the cone-shaped rock, a puzzled expression came over his handsome face.

"What do you make out of that, Charlie?" he asked, turning to the scout, who was fully as puzzled as he was himself.

"It's what I call blamed curious, Wild," was the reply. "That smoke don't come from wood burnin', that's sartin. I reckon we'd better try ter find out."

"Just what I think. Come on."

The trail they had been following was the route of the Overland stagecoach, which plied between Santa Fe and a hustling little mining camp fifty miles to the east, which bore the name of Firefly.

Half way between the two points there was a good-sized shanty, with stables attached, and here it was that horses were changed.

This halfway place was in charge of two men, who were

paid small wages by the Overland Company, and who made money by hunting and selling pelts.

Young Wild West had stopped there at noon that day, and after covering fifteen miles since two o'clock they had suddenly came in sight of the smoke.

Though we have said the spot was in one of the wildest parts of the mountains, the trail was one that was much traveled, for Firefly was a growing camp, and people were going to and from it nearly every day.

But more came to the camp than those who left it, might be said with truth, for things were on the boom at Firefly just then, and gold was being struck in quantities to suit the prospectors who came there.

While not all were getting rich, some were making an average of two hundred dollars a day, while new placers and lodes were being discovered every week or so.

Our friends heard of the place while they were in Santa Fe for a day or two, and they decided to ride over and see what Firefly looked like.

They had also heard that there was a gang of desperadoes, calling themselves the Death Band, located somewhere along the trail. No one had been able to locate them as yet, and as many robberies had been committed by them, frequent hold-ups of the stagecoach occurring, with bad results for the passengers every time, a reward had been offered for the leader of the band, dead or alive.

As Young Wild West and his friends rode on a few yards from the spot where they had halted they suddenly rounded a bend in the trail, and right before them, nailed to a big tree, was a placard which bore the following:

\$1,000 REWARD!

The above sum will be paid for the capture of Bill Dare, leader of the gang known as the Death Band, dead or alive. All information will be thankfully received, with the guarantee that the person giving it will not have his name divulged.

(Signed) J. HART, Sheriff,
Santa Fe, N. M.

"That's pretty good, boys," said the young deadshot. "A thousand dollars isn't picked up every day. There is a chance for someone."

"You are thinking of yourself, I'll bet!" spoke up Arietta, looking at him, with a smile on her face.

"Well, such things do generally interest me, Et," was the reply. "There is no telling but that we may run across the Death Band, and if we do we'll try for that reward. I haven't any use for such galoots as Bill Dare. We'll see how much he will dare, if I happen to meet him on even terms."

"He won't dare to do a thing, if that happens, Wild," Jim Dart said, shaking his head. "I know that much."

"Yer kin bet your life he won't!" the scout put in. "Wild ain't in ther habit of lettin' sich galoots do anything. When he tells 'em ter drop a gun, or ter hold up their hands, that's about ther only thing they do. They don't dare ter do anything else. Great gimlets! But I would like ter see yer run across him, Wild."

"If I do happen to I suppose I won't know who he is,

unless he happens to hold us up. Then we would be in a rather tight place, since they say he has over twenty men in his band."

"Well, we've got ter be on ther watch fur that. But how about that yaller-lookin' smoke we seen?"

The scout turned and looked in the direction the smoke had been seen as he spoke.

But a high cliff shut off all view of the place now, as they had proceeded just far enough to be excluded from a view.

However, it must be close to the trail, so they rode on, after taking another look at the placard.

A couple of minutes later they came in sight of the conical-shaped rock, but there was no smoke there now.

It was slightly to the left of the trail, and when they got almost opposite to it our hero called a halt.

"I am going to try and get up there and see where the smoke came from," he said, resolutely.

"Be careful, Wild," cautioned Arietta. "You may be running into a trap."

"That's all right, Et," was the reply. "If I do run into a trap I reckon I'll get out again. If I don't it will be the first time."

They all dismounted and watched the dashing young deadshot until he was lost sight of among the bushes and rocks.

"I can't help thinkin' that ther yaller smoke we seen has got somethin' ter do with ther Death Band, as they call it," observed the scout, shaking his head. "I reckon I better go after Wild, an' see that he don't git inter a trap, Arietta."

"Do so, Charlie," replied the girl. "I think that just about the proper thing to do."

Cheyenne Charlie set out in the same direction taken by the dashing young deadshot.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEATH BAND AND THE SECRET CAVES.

It will be in order now to find just what caused the sulphurous smoke to rise from the conical rock that loomed above the rough, jagged ones on all sides of it.

The spot was just about four hundred feet from the trail, but there was a wedge-shaped wall of earth and rock that ran straight out from the mountainside, and this shut off all view of it until one got directly opposite it.

But even then nothing could be seen that would indicate that there was anything out of the usual order of things there.

But there was, just the same.

The rounded surface, with its crack through which the yellowish smoke had been pouring, simply covered a big cave.

Perhaps it could hardly have been called a cave, for a cave is supposed to be an opening in the ground formed by the hand of Nature, and this one certainly had been the work of man.

But there was nothing so strange in this, since in

various parts of the territory of New Mexico caves have been found, which are really but the remains of the homes and temples of some former race, probably the Aztecs.

These caves, as we will call them, are still being found occasionally, and in many of them valuable relics have been discovered, as well as golden urns and the like.

It was in one of these caves that the fire that made the smoke arise was burning.

The fire was smoldering in a corner, where there was a big, wide fireplace that had been built of even-cut stones.

The chimney might have been formed by natural causes, or it might have been improved upon by the hand of man.

Anyhow, there was a good draught to it, and a fire once started would burn without throwing any smoke into the cave.

Just at the very time that Young Wild West was approaching there were as many as a dozen men in the cave.

They were sitting and lying about on boxes and skins, and one was bending over the fire.

A tall, rather handsome man sat on the only thing that could be called a chair, and he was watching the man at the fire.

"The smoke is all done now, eh, Jake?" he remarked.

"Yes, Cap; it has been done with fur a couple of minutes now. I've put on some charcoal now. Ther yaller smoke is gone, an' nothin' kin be seen comin' from ther crack now. I reckon ther boys has seen ther signal, if they're anywhere nigh."

"Well, I hope they have. The Overland stage is coming through about five o'clock, and we want to stop it. There's as much as eight thousand dollars aboard, and there will be plenty of passengers, too. But since there are to be six horsemen with it, to guard it, we will need all hands, I guess. That's why I ordered the signal to be sent up. We must make a clean job of it, and we don't want to have a man shot, you know. That is not our way of doing business. The Death Band is one that must live. Ha, ha, ha!"

Some of the men scattered about the cave joined in the laugh.

It was evident that the leader of the Death Band, as it was called, was a popular one.

"It might be that someone passing along the trail has seen the smoke, boys," he went on to say, with a shrug of the shoulders. "But even so, I rather think it would be of no account. There is no one but us who know how to get into the Secret Caves. I was the one who made the discovery, and I am sure that I was the first to find them. I really think I was the first to set foot in them in over two hundred years. That is a good while, boys; but what we found here shows plainly that there were pretty smart men in those days. They were smarter in doing mason work than they are to-day, that's sure. Why, just look at that fireplace, for instance! That was no doubt made for the burning of corpses. You can tell by the shape of it that it was intended for that purpose. That flat slab, which we allowed to drop to the ground, was no doubt where the bodies were stretched out when the burning took place. It might have been that they burned live ones, too. There is no telling about that."

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled, showing a fine set of teeth that were as white and even as though they had been made by a dentist.

"I never let it bother me about what was here, an' who they was, or what they done, Cap," said one of the men, shaking his head. "Them things is a little too deep fur me, I reckon. We're livin' now, an' we want ter do it in good shape. Let them what's gone afore us drop. We can't gain a single thing by thinkin' about 'em."

"That's so, Rogers. But sometimes I think there must be gold hidden somewhere in these caves. They had gold, and plenty of it, in those days, you know."

"Well, I reckon we'd be interested if we could find some of it, Cap. Gold is good any time, yer know, an' that's what everyone is after these here days."

"As you seem to have learned that much, Rogers, maybe you'll want to take a look around with me some time."

"Sure as yer live, I will, Cap'n Bill Dare!" was the reply.

"Good! But don't forget that we have something important on hand just now. The hunt for hidden gold in the Secret Caves can wait a while. What we want to-day is the gold that is in the box the stage is bringing over for us. They are fetchin' it along the trail just for us, boys. Maybe they don't think they are, but they are, just the same. The Death Band needs it, and they will have it, boys. Ha, ha, ha! But the life we lead can't be beat. We are robbers bold, and our hiding place is in the Secret Caves! We are as safe here as we would be in any part of the big earth. All we need do is be careful not to get caught when we are outside. One thing is certain! No one can ever get in here after us, for we have the way guarded too well for that. But if that were not the case, even, no one could find the way in. The Secret Caves are secret! The secret belongs to the Death Band, too."

Bill Dare was in an exultant frame of mind now.

He got up from the old chair, which looked as though it might have been taken from some tavern, and began walking slowly about the cave.

Suddenly he turned and went to a doorway, which was arched at the top, and passing through, entered a straight passage that led to a flight of stone steps.

Down he went for at least twenty steps and then he came to another arched doorway.

Into a wide chamber he walked, which was easily fifteen feet below the cave where the men were gathered.

On either side was a shelving of rock, so uniform that it seemed that it must have been made for some important purpose.

But the dust was an inch thick there now and a musty odor was prevalent through the underground place.

Bill Dare passed through the chamber without noticing anything particular.

He had been there many times before, so it was not new to him.

The full length of the cave was easily a hundred feet, and when he had reached the end of it he turned to the left and went through another doorway.

There were plenty of these, for it seemed that the Secret Caves were connected.

Light came through the rocky ceiling fifty feet above

him. It was a crooked crack that admitted it, and it was possible that the break had not occurred until after the caves had been fashioned by those who had found them centuries before.

But the natural light was all right. If it had not been that they were lighted in that way Bill Dare, the captain of the Death Band, would never have found them.

In the third cave a number of horses were stabled, and as the captain saw that they were all right, nibbling away at their hay, he gave a nod of satisfaction.

"A score of as good horses as can be found anywhere in this part of the country," he muttered. "Oh, we are nicely fixed here! What care I for the notices the sheriff has posted about? Ha, ha, ha! It is to laugh!"

A wide opening a little further on, which looked to be one that had come by accident, was now his objective point, and once there he was looking out into a narrow defile which ran through the mountain itself, it seemed.

The captain went outside, and then he stood looking up the defile, as though he expected to see someone coming.

If he did he was soon gratified, for around a slight bend, a quarter of a mile away, a small band of horsemen suddenly appeared.

The villainous leader of the Death Band gave a nod of satisfaction.

"It is as I thought," he muttered. "They were on the way here, and they saw the smoke signal. Well, I am glad, for it will take all hands to do the job we have ahead of us. The Overland people are aroused, and they have given a bond to deliver the money box safely to the smelter people in Firefly. They have gone to the expense of hiring a lot of cowboys—the most daring and reckless they could find, so they say. But we will see what they amount to when the Death Band appears before them."

He chuckled softly, and then waved his hat to the approaching horsemen, eight in number.

Counting himself, this made the band number exactly twenty, so it would seem that the Overland stagecoach passengers, driver and escort were going to have a hard time of it before they reached their destination that day.

The men were dressed much the same as ordinary cowboys, and would have been taken for them, no doubt, even by the sheriff himself, if he had met them.

But they were really hardened criminals, the same as those inside the Secret Caves, and nearly all of them were wanting in some State or Territory for the crimes they had committed.

The captain gave them a warm welcome and escorted them in.

CHAPTER III.

WILD AND CHARLIE GET INTO THE SECRET CAVES.

There was a thick growth of cedars at the foot of the conical-shaped hill, and once Young Wild West got among them he could no longer see the trail, or his friends.

He figured on climbing to the top of the elevation, and as he pushed his way along he was on the watch for some way to get up.

Connected with the hill was a ridge of rocky formation, which gradually widened as it proceeded toward the steep side of the mountain.

As the boy clambered upward he could not help thinking that the top of the ridge bore a strong semblance to the tops of a row of buildings.

While it was no exact representation, the general outlines came close to it.

From the trail below no such a view could be taken of it, so that would make it unnoticed.

The fact that they had seen smoke coming from the top of the rocky hill was quite enough to convince our friends that there was a cave somewhere under it; and when he likened the top of the ridge to housetops Wild thought that they might have been such once upon a time.

He had traveled considerably in New Mexico, and he knew that for caves it was a place that could hardly be beat.

Wild had also heard some talk about the sunken towns of the Aztecs that were supposed to be there.

He had come across underground chambers that undoubtedly had been formed by man on two or three different occasions; but Arizona was the place where this generally happened.

He was thinking of all these things as he slowly, but surely, worked his way to the top of the uneven hill of rock.

There were clumps of bushes and stunted trees growing from the fissures that were filled with earth, and it was quite easy to work his way among them.

One thing about it, Wild did not want to be seen from the trail even.

His own friends could see him; others could, too.

The boy was on a secret mission, and he felt that he was going to make a discovery.

He did not know that Charlie was following him until he was nearly at the top of the ascent.

Then the scout overtook him, for since he had someone to follow, he had proceeded faster.

"Arietta thought I'd better foller yer, an' I thought so, too," Charlie said, as he reached his side. "Maybe it'll be better fur ther two of us ter be here. Yer can't tell what might happen. Where there's smoke there must be fire, an' where there's fire there must be someone ter keep it goin'."

"That's right, Charlie," Wild answered, nodding his head and smiling at him.

They both spoke in whispers, for they knew it was hardly safe to let their presence be known, if there was anyone close by.

The two now made their way to the top, and then the opening in the rock through which the smoke had come was discovered.

Charlie gave a nod of satisfaction and looked at Wild.

The boy smiled at him, and then he whispered:

"Do you smell anything, Charlie?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Smells like gas ter me."

"That's just what it is. If there isn't charcoal burning somewhere close by I'll miss my guess, that's all!"

"We'll find where it is then, Wild."

"Yes, that's right. Come on."

Straight for the fissure they crept, the bushes and rocks giving them a chance to go around without being seen.

They did not care if Jim and the girls saw them, but they did not want anyone connected with the cause of the smoke to know they were there.

The odor of charcoal gas grew stronger as they crept along close to the opening in the rocky surface, and in a few seconds they were right where it was emerging.

Holding his breath, Wild peered over and looked down as far as he was able to.

He saw what appeared to be a regular chimney built of stones.

It was only a brief glance he got at it, but that was sufficient.

"Charlie, I reckon there's a regular dwelling place below. They use charcoal, so no smoke will be seen when they cook. But the yellow smoke we saw came from this same place, I am sure. That must have been sent up purposely. A signal, probably."

"Maybe so, Wild."

Having found that there was a chimney there, our hero was eager to find out more.

He led the way to the rear side of the rocky hill and then found himself looking down into a narrow defile that ran back to the steep side of the mountain.

A turn shut off the view of it, so he could not tell just where it went, though he was quite sure that it went on through, either in the form of a cut or underground.

Charlie nodded as he saw what the boy was looking at.

"If that ain't a trail that's used putty often I'll miss my reckonin', that's all!" he exclaimed, in an undertone. "It looks jest like a place where a band of bad galoots could git in an' out of ther cave under us; an' it goes around an' comes out on ther regular trail somewhere, yer kin bet!"

"Just what I was thinking, Charlie."

"S'pose we git down there an' see what it looks like?"

"A good idea, Charlie. You have got your thinkin'-cap on to-day, it seems."

"Well, that wasn't much ter think about," replied the scout; but he was pleased to find that the young dead-shot took to his suggestions so readily.

Without any loss of time they began working their way down the hill.

While they were up there nothing in the form of a cone could be noticed by them; but from a distance that was just the shape of the elevation.

They soon got down, and then almost the first thing they noticed was the wide opening that led into the Secret Caves.

Wild was not surprised.

The fact that there was a sort of chimney that must have been constructed by the hand of man at some time or other, was enough to convince him that there was some sort of an entrance, either open or concealed.

Both were elated at the discovery, however.

There was only one thing to do, since they had found

a way to get inside the underground place where the smoke had come from, and that was to go in and investigate.

Young Wild West was not the sort to let it go at what they had seen. He wanted to know all about it, and his venturesome spirit was bound to lead him on.

"I reckon we'll go in there, Charlie," said Wild, nodding his head. "Just be ready for something to happen. It may be that we'll get into a nest of hornets, or something worse."

"All right, Wild. Yer kin bet that my gun will bark if anything turns up wrong. You know how much use I've got fur sneakin' coyotes what hides in caves. I'm mighty sure that this gang is ther one ther reward is offered fur. We'll strike Bill Dare an' his Death Band all right. They're right here, all ready fur us ter land."

"I believe you, Charlie. But we've got to go mighty careful about this. We mustn't get caught if we can possibly help it. Now just tread easy and have your gun ready."

The scout gave a nod and then they boldly entered the wide opening.

Once inside they soon found the stabled horses, and then they knew they had struck the retreat of the Death Band.

Young Wild West was more than pleased, as might be supposed.

It seemed that he was destined to run into an adventure every time he got through with one.

Few were the days that passed in quietness with him.

The two walked through the wide chamber, treading noiselessly.

The horses looked around at them in the semi-darkness of the place, and one of them whinnied.

This caused them to hug close to the wall on the left.

They soon came to the long gallery, with the dusty shelving of rock on either side, and keeping right on, they came to the long flight of steps that led upward.

Pausing here, they listened, and as the sounds of voices came to their ears, rather faintly, they knew they were pretty close to the band of villains.

"A thousand dollars reward, eh?" our hero thought, as he started softly up the stone steps. "I reckon that can be made quite easy. We are in luck, I should say!"

Charlie was thinking about the same thing, but they did not speak to each other just then.

The two had barely reached the top of the flight when they heard footsteps approaching.

Wild looked around, and seeing a convenient place to hide, he took the scout by the arm and pulled him in after him.

Twenty seconds later a man passed them and went on down the stone steps.

It was Bill Dare, the captain of the Death Band, as the reader can easily guess.

Waiting until he had reached the bottom, Wild stepped out and moved around, so he might see where the man had come from.

Then it was that he got a sight of the headquarters of the Death Band and saw the villains present.

CHAPTER IV.

THE UNEXPECTED VISIT OF THE CHINAMAN.

Bill Dare was very glad at the return of the rest of his men, as has been stated.

"Boys," he said, as they unsaddled their horses, "I am glad to have you here, for I need you all. I suppose you saw the smoke signal?"

"Yes, but we was bound fur here, anyhow, Cap'n Bill," answered one of them. "Is there anything particular on hand?"

"I should say there was, Chris. The stagecoach is coming this afternoon with a box of money. We want the money—we need it badly, you know. There will be passengers, too, and they most likely won't be exactly broke. But there are six cowboys coming along with the outfit to protect it from the Death Band, you know. That's what I wanted you for. There may be more than six of them; I don't know exactly. Probably there might be as many as twenty of them."

"Well, I reckon we'll soon put 'em on ther run," said Chris, with a great degree of confidence. When them fellers once gits a look at us, with our masks on, an' ther big skulls shinin' on our breasts, they'll furgit about firin', maybe. Oh, we'll fix 'em all right, Cap!"

"We must fix them, one way or the other. If they don't scare they will have to be shot, that's all. I want all hands to take part in the game, so there will be no mistake about it. I think we had better let them have a volley from behind the rocks the first thing. Then before they know what to do we'll jump out on them and cover them. We must have that box of money. I want every man to keep that in his mind."

They all went to what might be called the main cave now, and soon there was an animated discussion going on.

The captain looked at his watch.

"It is getting close to four o'clock," said he. "About five the outfit will be coming along. Put on your working shirts, boys."

The villains quickly repaired to their bunks, and then they began donning flannel shirts that had grinning skulls painted on the fronts.

The grewsome pictures were painted upon canvas, and they were so natural in appearance that a master hand must have done the painting.

The captain nodded when every man had donned one of the shirts.

Then he coolly removed his coat and the shirt he wore, and a fine steel-linked vest was buttoned about him.

It came high to the neck all around him, so that a bullet aimed at his body could but flatten without doing any damage.

The vest was nothing more or less than a portion of a suit of mail, and in spite of its apparent lightness, it would stop a rifle bullet.

Over this Bill Dare put a shirt that contained one of the skull pictures.

It was a more expensive shirt than the rest, too; but that was no doubt because he was the captain.

"I'll face them, boys," he said, when he had buttoned

the shirt. "They say I bear a charmed life, and I guess I do, when I have my coat of mail on, anyhow. Four times I have had a bullet to land right over my heart, and that is why I have the left breast doubly protected. No bullet can ever reach my heart, boys! That is where the most of them aim for, too. Of course I have to take the chances of having them shoot at my head. But they don't do that, because they always shoot quick, and it is the body they aim for. I am sorry we haven't more of the steel coats. I paid an old Mexican two hundred dollars for this one, as you know. He can't get another one, he said; so we'll have to let it go. But I'll take all the risk, though, so you needn't mind. I have got plenty of nerve, and it is that which counts in this sort of business."

A faint cheer went up, which told how much the villains thought of their daring leader.

Captain Bill Dare smiled.

He was pleased at the demonstration.

"All good men, tried and true," he said. "Well, boys, you all know that I have never yet sent one of you where I would not go myself. I never will, either. Let us drink to the success of our next hold-up. Bring forth the foaming flagon!"

One of the villains made a rush for a sort of a closet that was in the corner of the cave, opposite the big fireplace.

He came back quickly with a big demijohn and a bunch of tincups that were tied together by the handles.

On each cup was painted a number, and on the belt of each man of the twenty was a number.

As the string holding the cups was untied the cups were distributed according to the numbers, and then the villain with the demijohn removed the cork and stood ready to give each what he wanted.

The captain was the first to be served, and then in single file they stepped up.

When all were ready a motion from the captain and the cups were raised to their lips.

"Here's success to all our undertakings, boys," he said, "and death to our enemies!"

A cry of approval followed and then the cups were emptied.

During all this time no one was on guard, which showed how safe the villains thought they were.

The tincups clinked and jingled, the men laughed, and then came a startling interruption.

There was a rattle and a clatter in the chimney and down came several stones and a pile of dirt, landing in the big pot that was hanging over the charcoal fire.

The cook for the band had been making a venison stew, and it was nearly done.

But when he saw the mess of stones and dirt come down, and the pot became overturned, he uttered a cry of dismay.

But that was not all!

Scarcely a second elapsed before a human body came down, landing almost squarely in the fire, and bounding from it like a rubber ball!

"Hip hi!" came from it in a shrill falsetto voice. "Me allee samee dlop down um chimney! Me um Chineese Santa Claus, so be! Hip hi! Hoolay!"

Consternation seized the twenty men composing the Death Band.

This was the most surprising thing they had ever been subjected to.

But the captain quickly recovered himself, and springing forward, he caught their visitor by the arm.

He saw that it was nothing more or less than a Chinaman, who had tumbled down among them.

Bill Dare was a man who could think and act quickly.

It flashed upon his mind right away that the Chinaman had fallen down the chimney accidentally, for no one would have been foolish enough to try to descend where the charcoal gas was rising.

But whether the fellow had been spying upon them or not, he did not know.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, as he quickly slipped a mask over his face before the Chinaman had a chance to see what he looked like.

The rest immediately turned their faces, and when they looked again they, too, were masked.

The Celestial must have made the exclamation we have recorded without knowing what he was doing—or it may be that he was but playing off, for he was now looking about the cave in a way that told that he was one of the most frightened mortals that ever drew the breath of life.

He looked around at the masked faces, shook his head sadly, and then looked at the fireplace.

Some of the men grinned, showing it below the black masks they wore.

"Whattée mattee?" he finally asked.

"You don't know what is the matter, eh?" queried Captain Bill Dare.

"Me fallée down, so be."

"Yes, that's right."

"Me climbee uppee hill to lookee where my fliends; me walkee by um clack in um glound; len me smellee something lat makee sickee, so be. Bang! bang—clickety—bang! Me comee down allee samee before me say Jackee Lobinson!"

The way in which he spoke was innocent and truthful, as well as humorous.

The captain laughed now.

He thought it was the truth he was hearing.

"So you climbed the hill to look for your friends, eh?" he said. "And you were overcome by something that smelled strangely, and then you came down here mighty sudden—is that it?"

"Lat allee light. Oh, don't hurtee um poor Chineese! Me allee samee velly muchee goodee! Me go to um Sunday School in Flisco!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bill Dare laughed heartily.

"Me likee gittee outee!" and acting as though he was getting more frightened all the time, the Celestial ran back to the fireplace.

But the moment he got a whiff of the fumes of the burning charcoal he uttered a frightened shriek and dropped to the floor of the cave.

"One of you go outside and look around, boys," said the captain. "Maybe his friends are in sight."

The man called Chris quickly left the main cave, heading for the lower ones.

Meanwhile the Chinaman began begging for his life to be spared.

"Me allee samee velly goodee Chinee!" he declared. "Me no likee looker at um men with um faces covered, and um dead man's faces on um bleasts! Me wantee go backee to China, so be!"

CHAPTER V.

HOP FOOLS THE DEATH BAND.

As the reader has no doubt guessed, it was Hop Wah, the clever Chinaman, who had tumbled down the chimney to the headquarters of the Death Band.

Hop was itching to go and hunt around the vicinity when Young Wild West started out, and when Cheyenne Charlie set out after him he made up his mind to go, anyhow.

"Missy Alietta," he said, "me likee go looker 'lound lillie bit, so be. Me velly muchee luckee, and maybe me allee samee findee um man whattee um sheliff givee um thousand dollee for."

"You stay right where you are, Hop," was the reply. "We will go over here behind the rocks and wait for Wild and Charlie to come back. There is no use in staying right here on the trail. Some of the band of villains the placard refers to might come along. If we should meet them just now it might go a little hard with us, because we are rather short-handed."

"Allee light," answered Hop, meekly.

When neither Wild nor Charlie were around he always looked upon Arietta as his boss.

But he made up his mind to have a look around, and whether she said so or not, he was going.

But he was not going right off in open defiance of her. He was simply going to wait for a good opportunity.

Jim Dart thought what Arietta said about getting off the trail behind the rocks was a good plan, so they were not long in doing it.

But the position they took not only concealed them from the view of anyone who might be passing, but kept them from seeing the conical hill, too.

However, they could not have seen the top of it, where the smoke had come from, if they had remained right on the trail.

Hop watched his chance, and after a few minutes had passed he sneaked off into the bushes, no one seeing him but his brother.

Wing seldom told on him, since he usually got treated mean, in some way or other, if he did.

Hop made straight for the hill.

He had noticed the way Wild and Charlie had gone, and he took care to follow in their footsteps.

But he did not want to come upon them suddenly, for he was not sure that they would be pleased at his having followed them.

Hop moved with no little caution.

Pretty soon he reached the top of the hill.

The crack in the earth was there, and so was the odor of burning charcoal.

He knew what that was right away, for he had quite a knowledge of all such things.

Hop moved around, being very careful, as he thought.

He leaned over the crack about ten feet from the spot where the gas was arising.

He found he could see down into a cave, though the opening slanted so much that he could not get a view of anything more than one of the sides of it.

But if he could not see, he could hear the sounds of voices.

"Me findee outee sometling, so be," the clever Celestial muttered under his breath. "Me wondee where Misl-er Wild and Misl-er Charlie go? Maybe ley allee samee findee outee, too, so be."

After finding which way the wind was blowing he got around and moved up to the place where the gas was coming from.

He got to it, and when he saw a wide flue that looked just like a chimney cut off even with the roof of a house, he was not a little surprised.

"Looker likee velly goodee stone workee," he mused, as he glanced at the masonry. "Been done allee samee velly long timee, so be. Lis old place where um Chinese livee, too, thlee thousand years ago."

A spirit of mischief came over Hop as he looked down the chimney.

The temptation to throw something down become so strong upon him that he could not resist it.

He quickly gathered some stones of the size of his fist and a little larger, and then stepping up softly, he let them go down altogether.

Then Hop laughed, for he could hear the sounds of confusion below him.

But the laugh suddenly ceased, for the Chinaman had gone just a bit too close to the edge of the opening, and as one of the stone blocks suddenly gave way he slipped and shot downward like a shot.

So unexpected was it that before Hop could thrust out his hands to catch himself, or stay his descent, he was half way down the flue.

His fall was checked somewhat by the stones his hands and feet came in contact with, but it was no use! He landed alongside the overturned pot of venison stew and let out the cry, as has already been told.

The clever Chinaman was nothing if not resourceful.

At first he intended to make it appear as though he had jumped down among the villains just for the purpose of showing them how brave he was; but it quickly flashed upon him to play the part of a poor Chinese, who was badly frightened, and this he did.

Hop was succeeding wonderfully, too, but when he declared that he wanted to go back to China there was a laugh all around from the members of the Death Band.

"I reckon your spirit might go back ter China, but not your body," said one of them, grinning hard at him. "It ain't very likely that you'll ever git out of this place ag'in—not alive, anyhow."

"That all depends on how he acts," added the captain.

"If he proves himself worthy, and cooks well for us, in time he may become a full-fledged member of the band. But, on the other hand, if we find that he is a spy he will be dropped into the hole that has no bottom."

Hop shook his head and groaned.

"Me no spy; me velly goodee Chinee," he declared. "Me likee lillee job to cookee for you, so be. Me velly goodee cookee."

"Well, s'pose yer try your hand at gittin' supper ready, then?" spoke up the man, who usually did the cooking for the band. "You upset ther pot of venison stew I was makin'. It was jest about done, too, which is a shame."

"We will have to wait until after our job is done before we eat supper, boys," said the captain. "I wanted that stew real bad, and I mean to have it yet. Let the Chinaman try his luck with you, Pete. If he don't know how to make it you can help. We will leave you here with him. When we come back we won't feel disposed to wait very long for our supper, you know."

"All right, Cap," Pete answered. "We've got plenty of stuff ter make another stew with."

"Me helpee," spoke up Hop. "Me no care if me gittee goodee job here. Me likee makee plenty money, so be."

"Well, how much did you get a month from the people you were with?" the captain asked.

"Me no workee month," lied the Celestial; "me no havee um payday."

"Is that so? Well, what did they agree to pay you?"

"No makee um allangements. When we gittee to um place where ley diggee gold len ley tellee whatee gittee um month."

"Oh, I see! You had a rather uncertain job of it. Didn't know what kind of a job it was, in fact. Well, you just behave yourself and do the right thing here, and maybe you'll come out a big winner."

"Allee light. Whatee me callee you?"

Hop brightened up as if by magic.

"Captain Bill Dare is my name."

"Allee light."

"I am leader of the Death Band."

Hop shook his head.

"Lat allee light," he declared. "Me hear 'boutee um Death Band. Velly bad Melican mans, so be. But me no care. Me comee flom China. Me do allee samee whatee me told, so be. Me wantee makee lillee money. Allee samee pretty muchee dead bloke now, so be."

To prove this, the clever Chinaman pulled out a well-worn pocketbook and opened it.

Only a few pieces of silver could be seen in it and a five-dollar bill, which looked as though it had been folded so long that it was about ready to break into pieces.

"You ain't exactly broke," observed Pete, the cook. "But you're leanin' toward that way, I reckon."

"Me wantee gittee fifty dollee, and len me feel velly muchee happy, so be."

If the villains had known that he had more than a thousand dollars on his person at that very moment they would not have acted the way they did.

But Hop was certainly carrying out his part, and he was in a fair way to win out, and without help, too.

As yet he had not been asked who his employers were, and in case he was asked he was not going to tell them.

He knew it was quite likely that the fame of Young Wild West and his partners had reached that part of the country, and if that was the case it would be rather surprising if the members of the Death Band had not heard of him.

Hop put his pocketbook back in his pocket, smiling sadly as he did so.

Then he started in to help Pete clean up the muss he had caused.

This move seemed to please the captain greatly.

"I think the heathen is all right, so long as we keep him in here, boys," he said to three or four of them in an undertone, so Hop could not hear it. "Some gang picked him up, and were taking him to Firefly with them, waiting to find out how things were before agreeing to pay him anything. If he had gone on with them they would probably put him at work with a pick between cooking times. A Chinaman don't stand much of a chance around this part of the country."

"That's right, Cap," the man named Rogers replied. "I don't s'pose it makes any difference who he works fur, as long as he gits a little pay fur it."

"Well, I'll see to it that he gets paid, if he deserves it."

CHAPTER VI.

CHARLIE'S FIGHT WITH THE OUTLAW.

Young Wild West and Cheyenne Charlie were hiding where they could hear all that took place in the main cave of the Death Band; and they could see some of it, too.

It was very interesting to them, and not a little amusing.

Hop's sudden descent into the cave surprised them about as much as it did the villains, and they were ready to start in shooting, providing the men decided to put an end to the Chinaman.

But the way Hop worked it made them realize more and more what a genius he was.

Our hero and the scout now knew all about the proposed hold-up, and they meant to prevent it.

To spoil the game of the Death Band would be the thing to do; and to capture Bill Dare, the leader, the next.

But since Hop had dropped down the chimney Wild's plans had to be altered.

The clever Chinaman must be taken away from there.

There was only one way to do this with any certainty, and that was to wait until the villains went out to get ready for the hold-up of the stagecoach.

The place the two had found to hide themselves in was a niche in the rocky wall that had broken away in the course of time, and it was so situated that they could crouch behind part of the wall and be unobserved, even if anyone chanced to halt right before it.

But neither Wild nor the scout feared being caught by the villains in the Secret Caves.

They felt certain that they could get outside quickly enough, if they were caught, and most likely the Death Band would be less in numbers before they did, too.

Every now and then they took a peep, and they could see that Hop was getting along swimmingly.

He was assisting the man named Pete with the making of another venison stew.

The outlaws seemed to have plenty of provisions there, so there was nothing to hinder them going right ahead.

A stream of water trickled down through the cave on one side, so they did not have to go far for that, either.

It seemed to be a rather long wait, but the young deadshot and his partner did not mind it so very much.

They felt it their duty to get Hop out of the cave, and they were going to do it.

Then they would turn their attention to the hold-up business.

It was not long after the stew was hanging over the fire again that Captain Bill Dare called all hands to their feet.

He had looked at his watch, and he now said:

"Come, boys! We must go and be ready to get the money box. Once the Death Band gets it safely into the Secret Caves we can defy all the sheriffs in the country. Come! There are nineteen of us, and I think we will win without getting a scratch. Pete will stay here with the Chinaman, so there will be a good supper awaiting us when we return."

Then the villains, masked to a man, and wearing their hideous-looking shirts, filed past Wild and Charlie and went on down to where the horses were.

Of course the two knew pretty much all about the caves now, for they had seen the rest of the band come in, and had heard all the conversation that followed.

Wild knew that they must hurry, if they would get to where Jim and the girls were waiting ahead of the outlaws.

They both knew that the defile must come out at least half a mile above the spot where their companions had been left, but from what they had heard the villains might ride along the trail in that direction, and if they happened to do this they might take a notion to capture the girls and shoot Jim Dart and Wing.

"We've got to get a move on us, Charlie," whispered the dashing young deadshot. "There is no use in going at it in a roundabout way, either."

"That's right, Wild," was the reply. "We'll jest sneak in an' make that galoot in there with Hop understand that if he wants ter live he's got ter keep his mouth shet till we git him fixed."

Listening, they heard the clatter of hoofs on the stone floor of the cave below.

Then they knew the Death Band was leaving.

But not sure that they could not hear a shout for help, providing the man called Pete might give one, Wild waited until the sounds ceased.

Then he stepped out of the niche and boldly walked into the main cave.

The scout was right at his side when he got there.

Hop and the villain sat near the charcoal fire, talking away at a great rate.

Neither of them heard the two until they were within a few feet of them.

Then Charlie coughed on purpose to attract their attention.

"Hello, Misler Wild! Hello, Misler Charlie!" called out the clever Chinaman, as he saw them. "Whattée you allee samee do here?"

The other occupant of the cave gave a gasp of astonishment.

"Hands up, you sneaking coyote!" exclaimed Wild, not noticing what Hop said.

The muzzle of a revolver was leveled squarely at him, so there was nothing for Pete to do but to obey the command.

His face turned deadly pale, however, and his knees shook.

So unexpected were the strangers that he could not begin to think how it was possible for them to get there.

"Don't shoot, young feller," he said. "I ain't done nothin'. Me an' ther Chinees is jest takin' it easy here, that's all."

"Lat light," nodded Hop; "we allee samee takee velly easy, so be."

"I should reckon so," observed the scout, as he took a look around the cave. "This is a mighty fine place fur a robber gang, ain't it? Bill Dare has sartinly got it fixed up in shape, all right."

Wild stepped up to disarm the man.

He took the revolver from his belt and handed it to Hop.

Then he reached for the long-bladed hunting knife.

But just then Pete drew back quickly and ran like a deer.

But as quick as he was, he did not get many steps before Charlie grabbed him.

But he had his knife yet, and drawing it, he made a slash at the scout.

"Ah!" exclaimed Charlie. "Do yer want ter fight? All right."

He had dodged the thrust easily, and in less time than it takes to write it he had his own bowie in his hand.

Clash—clash!

The two blades came together, for Pete was certainly willing to fight.

Young Wild West did not offer to interfere.

He knew that the villain had brought it all on himself, and if he died now it would be his own fault, and a well-merited fate.

Cheyenne Charlie knew something about handling a bowie knife.

Pete might have thought he did, too, but he was mistaken, compared to his adversary.

Around the cave they went, Charlie trying to keep his foe where the light was the strongest, so he could watch his every move.

Pete was desperate.

He seemed to have forgotten that if he should master the man he was fighting with he still had the boy, who had made him hold up his hands at the start, to contend with.

He struck right and left with his knife and tried his level best to plunge the blade into Charlie's breast.

But each attempt was cleverly parried.

Charlie kept pricking him with the point of his knife. He did this to show him that he was but at his mercy. But the villain would not give up.

There could be but one result to such a fight.

As Pete made a desperate effort, and tried to force an opening, so he might put in a blow that would finish the fight, Charlie side-stepped and gave out a quick thrust that settled the business.

The outlaw dropped to the floor of the cave with scarcely a groan.

"Come on," said Wild, "we must get out of here. Hop, we won't go the way you came in. There is another way."

"Allee light, Misper Wild. Me likee gittee outee, so be. But um skull mans no hurtee me, so be. Me allee samee foolee lem."

"I know you did. We were right here when you came down the chimney. We understand the whole thing. This way."

Leaving the man where he dropped, Charlie went along with Wild and the Chinaman.

Down the stairs, through the long chamber, and then into the cave where the horses were kept they went.

But they did not linger here.

The opening was right there, and out they went.

Then they clambered up the rocky hill and were soon working around it to the side next the trail.

As they came down they found that Jim and the girls were nowhere to be seen.

But the sharp whistle in imitation of the call of a quail quickly sounded, and then they knew where they were.

A minute later they joined their waiting companions.

"We allee samee gittee back allee light, Missy Alietta," said Hop, bowing to the girl.

But she paid no attention to him just then. Arietta was eager to hear what had happened, and she wanted to hear it from Wild.

The story was quickly told.

Then Wild informed them what the Death Band was going to do.

"I reckon we'll nip their game in the bud," he said.

CHAPTER VII.

THE HOLD-UP IS PREVENTED.

"Do you know just where they are going to make the hold-up, Wild?" Jim Dart asked.

"No; but not very far from here, I reckon. The stagecoach is due at the spot at about five o'clock. It is not very far from that time now."

He looked at his watch as he spoke and found that it was twenty minutes to five.

After thinking for a minute he came to the conclusion that they had better wait right where they were.

Something told him that the stagecoach would be attacked right in the neighborhood of the Secret Caves.

"We'll wait here until five, anyhow," he said. "Then if the outfit don't show up we'll go back until we find it."

While they were waiting Hop gave a graphic account of how he had tumbled down the chimney into the cave.

When he had done Arietta looked at him and said:

"I told you not to leave us, Hop. But I'll forgive you this time. You are a very lucky Chinaman, anyhow. But suppose Wild and Charlie had not been there—what then?"

"Oh, me velly soonee makee um Melican man callee Pete allee samee lettee me gittee outee. Me givee him um lilliee dlink whatee allee samee makee go sleepee pletty quicke, so be. Me gitee 'way allee light."

"That's right, Hop; I reckon you would have got away. One man couldn't have stopped you."

It was Wild who said this, and he spoke as though he meant it.

The Chinaman grinned.

If there was anything he liked it was praise from Young Wild West.

The girls were very much interested in the story they had heard about the Secret Caves.

It occurred to all three of them right away that there must be gold hidden somewhere in them.

"Oh, Wild!" said Arietta. "I should like to go through the caves after the Death Band has been routed. We might find something quite worth our while, you know."

"All right, Et; I reckon we'll have a chance to go through all right. But we'll have to clean up this gang first. There are nineteen live ones left, you know; and they are desperate fellows. They won't give in very easy, you can bet on that!"

"But they'll give in or die, though," spoke up the scout. "When they tackle their job they've got on hand in a few minutes from now I reckon they'll be surprised. When they start to shoot from ambush it means that we're goin' to shoot to kill. Ain't that right, Wild?"

"Yes, Charlie. But we mustn't give them a chance to shoot down the guards, who are coming with the stagecoach. Their scheme must be nipped in the bud."

"Well, yer kin count on me to do my part, anyhow."

"We all know that, Charlie. We all—hark! There comes the stagecoach now! She must be a little ahead of time. Come on, boys! Girls, you and the Chinamen will stay right here."

Then the dashing young deadshot sprang upon the back of his sorrel stallion, Spitfire, and rode from behind the rocks and bushes to the trail.

Charlie and Jim followed suit so quickly that the girls had no chance to make a reply.

The clatter of the wheels kept right on, the sounds drawing nearer all the time.

Around a bend the three galloped, and just then a shot rang out.

At the same moment the four horses pulling the stagecoach came into view.

But Wild scarcely saw them.

He was looking in the direction the shot came from, and as he saw a man placing a rifle to his shoulder, as though to fire a second shot, his own Winchester was leveled.

Crang!

As the sharp report rang out the man threw up his arms, dropped the rifle and fell forward from the rock he had been crouching upon.

Another man sprang into view, and then the scout's rifle spoke.

Down he went, following almost the exact course of the other.

Galloping horses then came around the bend, each with a cowboy on its back.

Crack—crack—crack!

The shooting became fast and furious, for the masked gang had become suddenly demoralized, and they showed themselves unconsciously.

"Give it to them, boys!" shouted Young Wild West. "Don't let one of them get away. Follow them up! Watch where they go!"

Bill Dare, the leader, in spite of his suit of mail, did not show himself just then.

His men, however, realized that help had come to the stagecoach from an unexpected source and they were doing their best to get away.

It so happened that they had ensconced themselves in a place where it was possible to gallop away under cover of the rocks, and they were now making for the defile as fast as their horses could carry them.

But Bill Dare found himself cut short of the chance to follow them without showing himself as a target.

He mounted his horse and rode around among the rocks until he managed to get between our friends and the girls.

There was another way to get around to the defile, and in order to get there he must go directly past the spot they were waiting at.

The villain quickly pulled off his mask and buttoned the velvet riding coat he had donned before leaving the Secret Caves over his breast, thus concealing the hideous skull that was on his shirt front from view.

Meanwhile the stagecoach had come to a halt.

The mounted cowboys, who had been hired to come with it, so it might be protected from the Death Band, were gathered around it, and much excitement prevailed.

The first shot fired by the masked villains had brought down the driver, with a bullet in his left forearm.

That was the only casualty the outfit had suffered, and as it was nothing like a serious wound, all hands were jubilant.

Young Wild West and his two partners rode up, feeling sure that the Death Band had beat a retreat for the Secret Caves.

One of the passengers, who had jumped out of the vehicle, revolver in hand, no sooner saw them than he uttered a shout.

"It's Young Wild West an' his two pards!" he cried. "They came jest in time, boys! Hooray fur Young Wild West, ther Champion Deadshot!"

The cheering awoke the echoes. The horses pricked up their ears more than they did when the shooting was in progress.

There was something that was so dashing about the boy, as he sat there upon the sorrel stallion, that those who had neither seen nor heard of him could not help joining in the cheering.

But Wild wanted to find out what damage had been done, and when he learned that the driver was the only one who had been wounded he gave a nod of satisfaction.

While the wound was being bound up he told them all he knew about the Death Band, and the information he had obtained by listening to some of their conversation. But he did not tell that he had been right inside their secret quarters.

Wild thought that unnecessary, as he wanted to have the honor of capturing the leader of the band.

Anyhow, it would have been extremely risky for anyone to enter the Secret Caves just then, for the villains would surely be on the watch.

The place where the hold-up had been attempted was right close to where the placard was posted, and pointing that way, our hero said:

"I see that the sheriff offers a reward of a thousand dollars for Bill Dare, dead or alive. Well, we are going to try for that reward. We don't exactly need the thousand dollars, but it will come in handy when we get it, of course. However, the honor of nabbing the scoundrel is really worth more than the money. We rather like to hunt down outlaws and bad Indians; it has become a sort of second nature to us, you know."

"I know," spoke up the passenger, who had recognized them. "I seen you fellers before. I've heard lots about yer, too. I don't s'pose yer know me, but I know you. I seen yer down in Silver City about three months ago."

"Well, I am glad there is somebody here who knows us," the boys answered. "But I reckon we'd better go and find out how the boys who went after the masked galoots made out. I haven't heard any shooting going on, so it's dollars to doughnuts that they haven't found them."

"It ain't likely they've found 'em, that's so," the driver observed. "You kin bet they've got a place ter hide, all right. But it gives me good satisfaction ter know that ther galoot what winged me got his medicine putty quick! I seen him go, I did!"

"Well, I shot him, I reckon. He was getting ready to take another shot, and I let go at him. I can't say that I like to take the life of a human being, but there are times when it must be done. Such fellows as they are shouldn't be allowed to run at large, anyhow. They meant to shoot into your ranks, and they didn't care how many they killed. They wanted the money box, and they were going to get it, no matter how many had to die before they did get it. But they won't try many more hold-ups around here, I'll guarantee that. We are going to get them. We'll try to take the leader alive, too."

Just then a shout was heard down the trail, and turning their gaze that way, they beheld a Chinaman running around the bend.

It was Hop, and it was easy for our hero to tell that something was wrong.

"Misler Wild! Misler Wild!" he shouted, waving his arms. "Um boss of um Death Band allee samee gittee Missy Alietta! Hully uppee!"

Young Wild West turned pale.

But he did not let his wonderful coolness leave him.

"Come on, boys!" he exclaimed; and away he rode like the wind.

CHAPTER VIII.

ARIETTA IS TAKEN TO THE SECRET CAVES.

Arietta could hardly keep from following Wild and his partners when they set out to meet the stagecoach. But since her dashing young lover had told them to remain there, she felt that she must do so.

But after the shooting was over her curiosity and desire got the best of her, and turning to Anna and Eloise, she said:

"It is all over—as far as any shooting is concerned, so I'll go up there and find out what happened."

"Better stay here," the scout's wife replied. "You can't tell what might happen."

"Oh, there is no danger of anything happening now. The villains have been put to rout, that's sure. I'll come right back as soon as I find out how they made out."

As she knew it was but a short distance to where the stagecoach halted, she started off on foot.

Rifle in hand, she went around the rocks and reached the trail.

It was at that very minute that a horseman came riding along from a direction opposite to that where the shooting had been going on.

The ground being soft, and as his horse was at a walk, the horseman had made little noise in his approach, and he was right upon the girl before she was hardly aware of his presence.

Arietta never had the least idea that he was one of the Death Band, much less the captain.

But such was the case, nevertheless. The horseman was no other than Captain Bill Dare.

He had worked his way around among the rocks, and had come out upon the trail on a little hill, nearly a quarter of a mile away.

Almost the first objects he saw when he looked toward the scene of the rout were the three girls and the Chinamen.

All Chinamen looked alike to him, so he did not think that one of them was the identical fellow who had tumbled down the chimney into the cave.

But he had seen the three, who had gone to the rescue of the stagecoach party, and he thought it safe to venture back to where the little party was gathered.

The sight of the girls was quite enough to make him feel like taking the risk, anyhow, for Bill Dare was one who always had an eye for a beautiful girl.

He did not know whether they were pretty or not, but when he came upon Arietta he found that he was looking at one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen.

"Oh, I am not alone!" was the cool reply. "I have friends close by. They are right behind the rocks, there. I was just going over to see how Young Wild West and his partners made out. They started off to prevent a hold-up of the stagecoach, and by the way the rifles and revolvers cracked for about a minute, I rather think the road agents got what was coming to them."

"Hold-up! Road agents!" gasped the villain with affected surprise. "What have I run into? I am on my way to Santa Fe, and if I ever get there I will thank

my stars, for Firefly is about the worst camp I ever struck. You are sure your friends drove off the road agents, Miss?"

"No; not sure. But if I was going to bet I would bet that way," Arietta answered, completely deceived by the man's manner.

Anna and Eloise, as well as the two Chinamen, were listening to the conversation, and only one of the four had any suspicion that the man was not what he was representing himself to be.

This was Hop. He felt certain that he had heard that voice before, and he could not help linking the horseman with the leader of the Death Band.

But he had not seen the face of Bill Dare, and thinking that it was impossible for that villain to be in that spot just then, he simply waited to see what would follow.

Hop did not have very long to wait, either.

The horseman had halted right close to the girl, and a slight pressure of his heel caused the animal to swing around suddenly toward her.

Then as Arietta made a move to step back out of the way, the villain suddenly leaned over and caught her about the waist.

Bill Dare was a powerful man, and it was no great task for him to draw her up across the horse's neck.

The scream that came from the girl's lips happened just at the very time that the cowboys and others were cheering for Young Wild West, so it was not heard by the young deadshot and his partners.

Away he dashed across the trail and among the rocks and trees that were plentiful on the other side.

That the horse knew the way was evident, for Bill Dare had all he could do to hold the girl on the animal with him.

But he soon had her arms pressed to her sides, and then he swung a loop of a short piece of rope he had with him over her head and slipped it down.

Getting it where he wanted it, he drew it taut, and then she was fast.

"Now then, Miss Golden Hair," he said, as he pressed the muzzle of a big revolver under her nose, "you just scream again and it will be your last! I am Bill Dare, captain of the Death Band, and a more desperate man never lived than I am! If you want to live just keep quiet."

Arietta had experienced so many thrilling situations that were similar to this one that she knew just what to do.

She remained perfectly silent, and her coolness returned to her right away.

The moment it flashed upon her mind that her dashing young lover knew just how to get in and out of the Secret Caves it made her feel that he would find a way to save her.

"Ah!" said the captain, as he saw that she was calm and collected, and did not offer to scream again. "You are what I call a very sensible girl. You are one among a thousand, I might say. That's right. Just take it easy, Miss Golden Hair. You'll be all the better for it, I am sure."

The horse was simply going at a little jog while he

was talking, for the way was too rough for any speed to be made.

But Bill Dare was nearing the defile now, and in three minutes more he would be there, he knew, unless something extraordinary happened.

Something extraordinary had already happened. The sudden appearance of the dashing young deadshot and his partners had been enough to demoralize the gang of villains, and to make the leader forget that he wore a coat of mail under his shirt.

When at length they reached the mouth of the defile, which was about three hundred yards from the entrance to the Secret Caves, Arietta turned her eyes upon the scoundrel's face and said:

"So you are Bill Dare, the leader of the Death Band, are you?"

"Yes, Miss Golden Hair," was the reply, with a smile. "What do you think of me?"

"Oh, I think you are all right—for one of your kind! But let me tell you something. Only this afternoon—less than two hours ago, I will say—I was reading the placard that is tacked to a tree alongside the trail. A thousand dollars reward is offered for you, dead or alive. Young Wild West and his partners are going to get that reward."

"Who is Young Wild West, Miss Golden Hair? I believe you mentioned that name before, didn't you?"

"You have never heard of him, then?" asked Arietta, feeling sure that he had, by the expression on his face.

"Well, it seems to me I have. I think I read something about him in a Santa Fe paper not long ago. He is called a champion deadshot, or something of the kind, isn't he?"

"Well, never mind what he is called. He is only a boy, but he will surely show you that he can do things. Nothing suits him better than to get after such men as you are."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The captain laughed, as though what she said amused him.

"You don't seem to realize that I am something more than an ordinary individual," he went on to say. "Why, what do you suppose I care for this Young Wild West? I am not afraid of the sheriff, or the governor and all the troops in the territory. I am Bill Dare—Da-r-e, Dare. Do you catch the meaning of the word?"

"Oh, yes. But a person can dare once too often, you know."

"That's right. Young Wild West will find that out if he gets after me, Miss Golden Hair. Ha, ha, ha! The idea of a boy taking me dead or alive! It is to laugh."

Arietta smiled scornfully.

But she said no more just then, for they had entered the narrow defile and she was looking for the hiding place of the outlaws.

The girl was remarkably cool now. She hardly feared her captor, for as yet he had not offered an insult to her.

So long as he acted in this way she would not care much, since she was confident of being saved by her dashing young lover.

The wide entrance to the Secret Caves could not be seen until a bend was rounded a hundred yards from it,

and even then it looked about as much like an opening that did not extend far into the earth as anything else.

But when they got to it, and the horse went on inside the cave, Arietta knew that she had reached her destination.

"Well, here we are," said Captain Bill Dare, as he dismounted. "You are now in the Secret Caves, which some foolish persons will no doubt consider great, when they are discovered long after we get through with them. They are the remains of big buildings that existed a couple of centuries ago, Miss Golden Hair. Quite wonderful to you, I suppose."

"Oh, I am used to seeing things that are called wonderful," was the cool rejoinder.

CHAPTER IX.

HOW THE COWBOY CAME TO BELIEVE HOP'S STORY.

Hop knew who it was when he saw the man pull Arietta on the horse with him and ride off.

Then he easily understood why he thought he recognized the voice.

The Chinaman lost not a moment, but went running for the spot where the stagecoach was at a halt on the trail.

He called out what had happened, as has been recorded, and when he saw the dashing young deadshot mount his horse he beckoned for him to come that way.

Wild, followed by Charlie and Jim and all the mounted cowboys, rode down the trail, the Chinaman leading the way.

Hop knew just where the villain went when he crossed the trail, though he had disappeared so quickly with his fair captive that neither Anna nor Eloise had time to fire a shot, even if they had felt capable of bringing the horse down, without running a big risk of hitting the girl.

"He go lat way, Misler Wild!" Hop shouted, pointing to the exact spot where the man had disappeared with Arietta.

Anna, Eloise and Wing were out from behind the rocks now, and they, too, pointed out the direction and shouted for them to hurry.

But the one bad thing about it all was that the ground was so hard and stony that the prints of horses' hoofs would not show.

That caused more or less delay, of course.

But our hero and Charlie knew exactly where the entrance to the Secret Caves was located, so they felt that they were bound to find it, anyhow.

"I reckon he has had time to get there, boys," our hero said, keeping cool as though nothing of a serious nature had happened. "We won't try to follow him on horseback. We'll go there on foot. Arietta has got to be saved."

"There ain't no mistake in what he says, boys," Charlie hastened to say, as he turned and nodded to the cowboys.

"There's goin' ter be a fight, I reckon. Them galoots won't let us git in ther Secret Caves any kind of fashion."

"Secret Caves, yer say?" one of the cowboys said, looking surprised. "Is that where ther galoots hang out?"

"Yes," Wild answered, quickly. "We know just where they are, too, for we were in there. Come on back to the trail, and then we'll go on foot. I suppose the whole gang is there before this."

"Two of 'em ain't, I know," another of the cowboys declared. "I seen that many drop, anyhow."

"I reckon I winged one of ther masked galoots myself," spoke up another. "You'll find that more'n two of 'em went under."

Our hero turned and rode back to the trail.

He had come to the conclusion that there was little use in riding on the trail of the villain, anyhow, for it was pretty certain that he had started for the Secret Caves with Arietta.

They soon reached the trail, and when Anna and Eloise saw them coming they ran toward them, thinking that Arietta had been found.

But they soon found that they were mistaken.

"It's all right, girls," said Wild. "We'll get her, never fear. The galoot must have her in the hiding place of the Death Band by this time. I reckon we'll try a little strategy. That will be better than rushing in, for they would have a chance to shoot us down if we did that."

"That's right, Wild," Charlie said, for he always agreed with what the boy said.

But the cowboys were eager to get at the villains, and they would have made an effort to rush right into the caves, if they had known the way.

Wild talked to them a minute or two, and he convinced them that it would be better to remain outside and guard the place, while he worked his way inside, unknown to the outlaws.

Not being sure that there was not another way to get in and out of the caves, Wild thought it best to station some of the men on the side of the cone-shaped hill of rock.

He explained to them that they were to stay there, and that all they were to do was to watch and listen.

"I am going to try and get inside the place, and I want my partners to get there with me," he said. "If that happens I reckon we'll come pretty near saving my sweetheart from the Secret Caves. If we do get in there, and happen to get into trouble, you will hear us shoot. In that case you can come down the hill, the way we are going now, and see what you can do. Now, if you will do as I say and will stay right up here and listen at the crack that runs through the top of the hill, you will help us carry through the thing. We don't care so much for the reward that is offered, as we do to save the girl. Of course we want to capture Bill Dare alive, if possible. If we can't we will send him to the sheriff dead, that's all."

"We'll do jest as yer say, Young Wild West," the man who seemed to be a sort of leader of the cowboys declared. "You go right ahead."

Satisfied that they would, Wild called his partners to follow him, and then made his way softly down the hill.

They had barely disappeared among the rocks when

Hop came up the hill, followed by two of the passengers of the stagecoach.

The Chinaman was smiling in his "child-like and bland" way, and the cowboys grinned when they saw him.

As yet they knew nothing of his cleverness, but they were to learn something about it very soon.

"Me allee samee go down in um cave, so be," Hop said, putting on an important way. "Me allee samee go down um chimney, so be."

"Yer did, eh?" queried one. "What do yer call ther chimney?"

"Me showee you, so be. Come lookee."

Hop led the way to the place he had tumbled into, going a little more careful this time.

The majority of the men followed him.

When they saw the chimney that was built in such a neat way with blocks of stone they were more than surprised.

"No makee noisee," cautioned the Chinaman. "Um Death Band allee samee down here, and ley maybe hear, so be."

His listeners began to think that he was of more importance than they had supposed at first.

They had not heard of the happenings in the underground place, since Wild had not deemed it worth while to tell them.

But if he had known that Arietta was going to be captured by Bill Dare it might have been different.

Hop proceeded to tell them how he had slipped and tumbled down the chimney, and what had followed.

Few of them believed his story.

"Lat allee light," he said, when one of the men declared that he didn't believe it. "You no tlinkee somebody allee samee can fall down? You lookee down, and len you see, so be."

The doubting cowboy did move up closer and look down.

Then something happened that even Hop did not look for.

The stonework crumbled away under his knees as he was in the act of taking a peep downward, and grasping wildly about him for something to hold fast to, he went shooting downward, feet foremost!

Everything he caught hold of gave way, it seemed, and with a long-drawn yell, he went on down.

Hop collected himself first of all.

He seized the lariat one of the men had coiled and thrown over his shoulder when he ascended the hill, and quickly uncoiling it, he let the end drop downward.

Crack!

The report of a revolver sounded under them, though it was muffled and not very distinct.

"Hip hi!" shouted Hop down the chimney. "Catchee um lope!"

The charcoal fire had burned out, or had been extinguished in some way, so there was no gas coming up to interfere with them.

"Pull me up—quick!" came from below, almost as soon as the end of the rope reached the bottom of the opening.

Others heard it besides the Chinaman, and in a twinkling they were hauling upon the lariat.

There was the weight of a man at the end of it, too, and they knew they were bringing up their pard.

As the distance was but twenty feet, he soon came in sight, and half a dozen hands grabbed him and drew him out, though more of the stonework crumbled away and tumbled down the chimney.

But no one went with it, for they were too much on the lookout for that.

Hop danced about with delight when he found the cowboy had been rescued.

When he had seized the rope and dropped it down he never once felt as though it would be any use; but he had acted as the thought struck him.

"You gittee outee allee light," he said, nodding to the man.

"Yes, but I had a mighty narrer escape, I reckon," was the reply.

"You landee on you feet, so be?"

"Yes, an' I only got a good jar, 'cause my fall was broke by me spreadin' out my feet an' sorter slidin' down. When I landed I upset a pot of hot stew, an' then I seen a man runnin' toward me as though he was nigh scared to death. But he soon pulled a gun, he did."

"Did he shoot at you, Ben?" one of his companions asked.

"No," was the reply, "I was too quick fur him, I reckon. I knowed I had ter do somethin', so I jerks out my gun an' fires quicker'n lightnin'. I hit him all right, an' he went down like a busted balloon. Then I heard ther Chinee holler about ther rope, an' I runs fur ther fireplace. I gits hold of ther rope, an' here I is. I wasn't a second too soon, either, fur I could hear a lot of galoots runnin' over ther stone floor somewheres."

"Well, if you ain't ther luckiest galoot I ever seen!" exclaimed one of the passengers.

"He allee samee believee me now, so be," Hop added, with a grin on his yellow face.

"Yer kin bet I do!" was the reply.

CHAPTER X.

WILD AND HIS PARTNERS MAKE A CAPTURE.

Wild and Charlie had just worked their way down into the defile, near the entrance of the Secret Caves, when a pistol shot sounded faintly somewhere within.

"What's up, Wild?" queried the scout, and just then Jim slid down and joined them.

"That's hard to say," was the reply. "But something is wrong."

They spoke in low whispers, and Jim, the last to get down there, hurried toward the opening, taking the risk of being seen and shot by someone belonging to the band.

He was in time to hear hurrying footsteps, and it did not take him longer than a second or two to realize that they were receding ones.

He turned and beckoned to his partners, who at once

understood that the way must be clear, and they hurried to the mouth of the opening.

Wild gave a nod when he found there was no one there to oppose them.

"Come on in," he whispered, and then Jim permitted him to lead the way.

Revolver in hand, the dashing young deadshot pushed on into the cave.

The first thing he took note of was that the horses of the outlaws were there.

Then he knew that those who had not been shot down when the stagecoach was stopped had reached their haunt.

Motioning to his partners to follow him, he went to the left, keeping close to the wall of rock.

In this way the foot of the stone stairway was reached. But just then footsteps were heard above.

There was a dark corner there, and the three lost no time in crouching in it.

Then down the steps came two men.

They each held revolvers in their hands, and in the dim light of the underground place they could see that they were much disturbed over something.

"This is what I calls bad work, pard," said one of them, as he reached the foot of the stairs and came to a halt within a dozen feet of our friends. "A galoot comes down ther chimney an' shoots Alonzo, an' then he's hauled up ag'in by a rope. Poor Alonzo jest had time ter tell about it afore he died. There's been mighty queer doin's here to-day. There's that heathen Chinee, too! Look how he come down ther chimney!"

"You're right, Sam," was his companion's reply, as he shook his head. "But ther worst thing of it all is that Young Wild West is after us. We've heard about that boy, yer know. He never lets up when he gits started. Somethin' seems ter tell me that we're goin' ter git wiped out—I can't help thinkin' so. But come on! We've got ter watch fur ther galoots. They may come through ther defile, yer know. It might be that they don't know that way, an' that ther Chinee got up ther chimney, after knifin' Pete, ther same as ther other feller did. I hope they don't know ther regular way ter git in here, 'cause if they do there'll be more of us ter turn up our toes, I reckon."

"Yes, that's right. I think ther cap'n has made it worse by catchin' ther gal an' fetchin' her here. But one thing about it is that they'll never see her alive ag'in, if they do come in. He's goin' ter take her down in ther death cave if he finds they're gittin' ther best of us."

Young Wild West felt like springing out upon the two men then, and forcing them to tell where Arietta was confined. But he reasoned that it was best not to let them know of their presence yet. He meant to save the girl by strategy, if it was possible.

The footsteps of the two men soon died out, showing that they had reached the outlet of the cave, and had taken up their station to watch for the approach of the enemy.

Wild knew it would be dangerous to go up the stone stairs, but he felt that he must do it in order to save Arietta.

"Boys," he whispered, "I reckon I'll go up there. I must find where Arietta is."

"Hadn't we better go with you, Wild?" Jim asked, shrugging his shoulders. "Three will be much better than one, if it comes to a fight."

"That is true enough. But one won't be so apt to be caught, I reckon."

"But we can go to the entrance of the caves and catch the two galoots who just went out there. They could be forced to tell where she is."

Wild seldom changed his plans, but in this case he thought Dart's suggestion was a good one.

"All right," he said, nodding his head, approvingly. "I reckon we'll go and make the two galoots tell just where she is. Then we will know just what to do. I didn't want anyone to know that we were in here, but I suppose one of us could escort them out after we have got the information we want. Come on."

The three stepped softly along over the stone floor, which was very smooth just there, and gradually they approached the opening through which the daylight was streaming.

It faced directly west, and the rays of the declining sun were shining in, making a golden track through the centre of the cave.

But Wild and his partners took care to keep out of this.

The two men were standing just outside, and it struck our friends how easy it would be for the cowboys to shoot them, if they only took a notion to come down the hill.

Stealthily they made their way, and when they finally reached the edge of the opening they paused for a few seconds before proceeding with the task they had ahead of them.

The only bad thing about it was that one, or both of them, might yell loudly to their companions, and then there would be a rush for the spot.

But Young Wild West seldom failed in an undertaking of this kind.

While he was not a little worried about his sweetheart, his coolness never once left him; and it was through that wonderful coolness of his that the boy had made such a success in life.

Looking around the floor, Wild saw a piece of stone about the size of half a brick.

It lay near at hand, and he quickly stepped over and picked it up.

But he had no intention of hitting either of the villains with the stone.

He wanted it for another purpose.

Charlie and Jim did not know just what he meant to do, so they watched him in breathless silence.

Wild stepped up close to the mouth of the cave, and then poising the piece of brick in his hand, he threw it back into the cave.

Thud!

The stone came down, making a noise that attracted the attention of both the men.

In they came, and then they found themselves looking straight at the muzzles of three revolvers.

"One little sound from either of you and you both will

die!" said Young Wild West in a tone of voice that was low, but full of meaning.

The two stopped still in their tracks.

"I reckon you fellows understand the situation," went on our hero in his cool and easy way. "You don't want to die, I know. But if you do want to, just make one little sound."

Neither of them made a sound, but both tried to gulp down an imaginary lump that had come up in their throats.

"Hold up your hands!"

They obeyed the command, both at the same time.

"Jim, just relieve them of their guns."

Dart lost no time in doing this.

"Now then, boys," said Wild, coolly, "I reckon you can escort the two galoots to the top of the hill and turn them over to the cowboys for safekeeping. You can come back here, and if you see nothing of me, come right on in. If you don't find me when you get to the foot of the stairs, come on up. You can bet the coast will be clear. But hold on a minute! I almost forgot what we wanted these galoots for."

The scout gave a nod to this, showing that he had thought about it.

"I want you to tell me where the girl is," said our hero, looking the two captives squarely in the eyes.

"Ther captain put her in one of the Secret Caves," answered one of them quickly. "We don't know which one; we wasn't there when he done it."

There was such an air of truthfulness about the man that Wild was forced to believe him.

"Are there more caves than the three that are connected?" he asked.

"Yes, there's a lot of them. We've never been in all of 'em yet."

"Then you couldn't guess which one it is?"

"No."

"Suppose your lives depended upon telling the truth, what then?"

"I am tellin' ther truth, Young Wild West."

"That's right," chimed in the other.

"How does it happen that you know me?"

"I only guessed it," said the one who had answered the questions. "We heard ther cap'n sayin' somethin' about yer."

"Oh, that is it, eh?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well, go on now. The better you act the better it will be for you."

"I hope yer won't turn us over to ther sheriff."

"That is something to be considered later on. Perhaps we won't have to."

The villains winced at this, for they understood.

They might be lynched by those outside in waiting.

That they were deserving of such a fate they well knew.

But they did not deign to say anything more, and Charlie and Jim led them out of the cave.

Wild turned and made his way back into the cave.

This time he did not hesitate to mount the stone steps.

Up he went, treading as noiselessly as though he was

working his way past the guards of a camp of hostile Indians.

Reaching the long cave above, with its stone shelving on either side, he could hear the low hum of voices.

It was easy for him to tell that the speakers were not only excited, but much worried.

"You will be stirred up still more than you have been before I get through with you," he muttered, under his breath. "In capturing Arietta the captain has done the worst thing he could possibly do, I reckon. I wouldn't give up now if there were a thousand of you in there, instead of a dozen and a half."

The boy was determined to carry out his point now, which was not only to rescue his sweetheart, but to take the leader of the Death Band, dead or alive.

Through the long gallery he went, and a few seconds later he reached the very niche that he and Charlie had waited and watched in previously.

From this position he could see the band of men inside.

They were still masked, and the hideous skulls on their shirt-fronts showed up with grewsome effect.

Near one of the tables in the cave lay two objects that were covered with blankets.

That they were the two men who had been shot in the cave Wild could easily guess.

He counted the villains and found that there were just thirteen of them.

"There must have been three of them to fall outside," he thought. "Two in here, and the two Charlie and Jim just took away, would make twenty. Well, I reckon there'll be still less of them before this business is over."

The only thing for him to do now was to listen and hear what might be said.

But he soon found that they were not talking about the girl the captain had brought there, at all.

The topic of conversation was the dying words of the man the cowboy had shot before he was pulled up the chimney by the rope.

The pot, which had been upset twice, lay just where it landed, and the venison stew was scattered over the floor.

But it was evident that the appetites of the men were gone, so it mattered little to them.

Near the captain was a bearded man, who seemed to be advising him, for he had more to say than any of the rest.

This was the villain named Rogers, though Wild did not know who he was, of course.

Presently the captain said:

"Well, Rogers, you are my lieutenant, so I'll tell you this much. If it happens that I should be killed, and you have the chance, I want you to see to it that the girl never gets out of the Secret Caves. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Cap'n Bill, I understand; an' I'll give you my word on it, too," was the reply.

CHAPTER XI.

HOP SURPRISES THE SECRET BAND, AND THE COWBOYS, AS WELL.

Charlie and Jim took the two prisoners up the steep ascent from the defile without any trouble.

They both seemed resigned to their fate, and not a word did they say as they were led upward.

The cowboys were gathered near the crack in the rocky top of the hill, Hop being with them.

Below on the trail were Anna and Eloise, with Wing and the stage coach passengers.

The outfit had pulled up there, and the driver, whose wound had been fixed up, declared that they would wait and see how Young Wild West made out about getting the girl away from the Death Band.

Charlie and Jim could not see them, of course, since there was a narrow stretch of rock between them, which reared itself so high as to shut off all sight of the trail.

When Hop and the cowboys saw them coming with the two prisoners there was much excitement.

But Jim Dart held up his hand warningly, so there would be no demonstration.

It was well that he did this, for the cowboys were ready to give vent to their feelings in the form of a shout.

The villains still had their masks on, and with the death emblem on their shirt fronts they looked odd, indeed.

Hop stepped forward and greeted them with a smile.

"You velly nicee man, so be," he said to one. Then he turned to the other and added:

"You velly nicee man, too, so be. Me likee you. Me velly muchee glad to see you tied up, allee samee. Pletty soonee um lope go 'lound your neckee; uppee you go! Hip hi! Um Death Band hoolay!"

"That's what ther matter!" spoke up the man who had dropped down the chimney. "Let's hang 'em right away, boys!"

Cheyenne Charlie shook his head.

"There ain't nothin' goin' ter be done with 'em till Young Wild West comes back," he said, decisively. "He bossed ther job of takin' 'em prisoners, an' he's goin' ter say what's ter be done with 'em."

That settled it.

But the cowboy insisted on having a look at their faces, anyhow, and he stepped up and removed the masks.

No one knew them, though all eyed them closely.

The two villains were very pale, for they no doubt felt that they stood a mighty slim chance.

"Wild says fer you ter take good care of these galoots till he comes back," said the scout to the cowboy called Ben. "We're goin' back there now, an' we're goin' ter help him git Arietta. These two was ther guards, so we'll have putty plain sailin', I reckon."

"Can't none of us go with you?" spoke up another of the men.

"No; he wants to do ther job by strategy," Charlie answered. "By doin' it that way it will save any of us from gittin' shot."

The cowboys said no more.

But Hop started off of his own accord now.

He meant to get into the cave once more, though he was not going by the way he did the other time.

He slipped away and got ahead of Charlie and Jim before they were aware of it.

When they went down the steep descent to the defile they found him standing there.

Charlie shook his fist at him, but said nothing.

The clever Chinaman simply bowed and smiled, and then he slipped in through the mouth of the cave.

The scout and Jim followed him.

They both knew that he would proceed all right, as he had learned the tricks of the trade, so to speak.

Hop had been too long with Young Wild West and his friends to not understand how to go with caution.

He was keeping in advance of Charlie and Jim as he went on his way, and when he found that he could not overtake him without hurrying, Charlie got a little angered.

"Ther heathen fool!" he said in a whisper to Jim. "I'd jest like ter have him by ther pig-tail now! If I wouldn't hustle him out of here it would be a caution!"

But Hop kept right on going, listening and slipping along with noiseless tread.

He passed through the caves and went up the stone steps, with the scout and Jim a dozen feet behind him.

Finally he paused right at the place where our hero was still in hiding.

As he crawled in and took a place behind him Wild nodded, but said nothing.

The next minute Charlie and Jim came there, too.

The boy merely nodded to them, for he had been listening to the conversation that was being carried on by the villains in the main cave, and he had learned something of his sweetheart's whereabouts.

All the time his partners were gone the outlaws had been talking in low tones.

Bill Dare had drifted into a gloomy frame of mind.

He paced back and forth, leaving it to his lieutenant to talk with the men.

But as many times as he heard mention of the fair captive, not once did Wild get an inkling as to where she was confined.

The waiting boy had been getting desperate when Hop and his partners arrived.

He felt like stepping out before the Death Band and demanding the instant release of Arietta.

But he knew this would hardly do, for while he might shoot as many as half a dozen of them, and then get away himself, he could not expect to find the girl.

He now thought of a plan that might work.

Putting Hop's ear to his mouth, he whispered:

"You go out, and when you get to the top of the chimney let something come down that will explode and wake the galoots up. You don't want to blow up the whole place, you know. Just use one of the big crackers you have got."

"Allee light, Misler Wild."

Hop always made it a point to keep a stock of powder and certain chemicals on hand. He bought such things at about every city they ran across.

He could make fireworks, and though crude in appearance, they usually did all that was required of them.

Feeling very much pleased at having come there, Hop left the hiding place and made his way softly from the caves.

Once outside, he clambered up the steep hill, and soon joined the cowboys.

Anna and Eloise had come up by this time, and the

moment the Chinaman arrived they began plying him with questions.

"Um Death Band allee in um cave down here," stamping his foot on the rock to indicate that he meant directly below. "Misler Wild and Misler Charlie and Misler Jim allee samee watchee, so be. No see Missy Alietta, but allee samee findee her pletty soonee. Misler Wild tell me to shootee off um fireclacker."

There was a little encouragement in what he said, so the girls were relieved slightly.

The men, who were standing around, looked surprised when they heard the Chinaman say he was going to set off a firecracker.

But they just waited and watched him.

The two prisoners were sitting on the ground, tied hand and foot, and even they showed interest in the Chinaman just then.

Hop drew a rough-looking cracker from his pocket.

It was covered with a tough brown paper and bound tightly with cords.

Were it not for the fuse that protruded at one end no one could have guessed what it was.

But it was a good cracker, just the same.

Hop had learned how to make them in China, and in spite of the fact that he could not get hold of the necessary trimmings to make them now, he could get up one that would make the required noise.

"Evellybody watchee," said he, as he walked close to the opening that went down in the form of a chimney to the cave below.

First he took a cigar from his pocket, which was a habit of his when about to create an explosion, and lighting it, used the same match to ignite the fuse of the cracker.

He held it until the fuse was nearly burned away, and then he let it drop down the stone chimney.

Bang!

In less than a second there was a report like that of a small cannon; the rocky mass shook under the feet of those standing upon it, and a puff of smoke came from the hole.

"Lat pletty goodee, so be!" exclaimed the Chinaman, and then he pulled a small paper parasol from somewhere, and raising it, held it over his head and began parading about like a turkey-cock.

The effect of the explosion had startled the men standing about, but when they saw the Chinaman walking about with the parasol they looked at him in silence for a moment and then broke into a laugh.

"That's ther greatest thing I ever seen!" declared Ben, the cowboy.

"Hop," said Anna, running over to him, "we don't want to make a circus of this. You must remember that Arietta is in peril. She must be saved."

"Allee light," was the reply, and then the parasol, which was a jointed and folding one, slowly disappeared as the clever Chinaman placed it to his mouth and made out that he was eating it.

To those who had never seen him perform his sleight-of-hand tricks this was a wonderful feat, indeed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DEATH OF BILL DARE.

Wild and his partners were waiting patiently for Hop to let the cracker come down the chimney.

They were expecting it every second, yet when it came they were startled.

The effect was all that could be imagined.

The villains in the cave fell over each other in an effort to get out of the way, while the cave was filled with smoke.

But as he made them for the purpose of aiding an escape, this was a good thing.

In this case, however, the smoke only served to upset the outlaws more than ever.

Only one of them managed to find the way to the arched doorway that connected with the cave next to it.

Wild caught a glimpse of him as he went through the smoke, and whispering for his partners to stay right where they were, he darted out of the niche and went after him.

Not until he got to the head of the flight of stone steps did he get a good view of the man.

Then he gave a nod of satisfaction, for it was no other than Bill Dare himself.

The villain must have thought it was all up with him, and he was bent on getting out of the hiding place that he had considered so secure but a few short hours before.

Wild went down the steps in a hurry, not caring whether the villain heard him or not.

Just as he reached the bottom the captain did hear him.

He turned, no doubt thinking it was one of his men, who was following him.

But the fancy hunting suit of buckskin the boy wore was so different from the habiliments of the members of the Death Band that he was readily recognized.

Wild had his revolver in his hand, and when he saw the scoundrel pull one and back toward the opening of the cave he did not hesitate to draw a bead on him.

Crack!

The report rang out through the underground place, but the din that was going on in the cave drowned it, no doubt.

Instead of falling, as our hero supposed he would, Captain Bill Dare merely started back a step, and then he fired at the boy.

But his aim was not very good and the bullet whistled past his head a foot from it.

Wild knew he must have hit him, yet the man did not drop.

He fired again, but the result was the same.

Both bullets had struck the man's shirt in the region of the heart, but still he was unhurt.

But, as the reader knows, it was the steel vest he wore that saved him.

The boy became a bit exasperated, because he thought he had missed twice in succession.

This was something he could not understand, too, and he made up his mind to make sure the next time.

Seeing that the villain was going to fire again, he jumped to the right and dropped at the same time.

Crack!

Bill Dare fired, but the bullet went wide of the mark.

Then Wild fired from the floor, striking him squarely in the breast with the bullet.

This time the leader of the Death Band made an involuntary grab at the spot where the bullet hit him, and then Wild knew he had not missed the mark.

But when he saw the villain suddenly make a rush toward him, it flashed upon his mind that there was some device under the shirt to prevent a bullet from entering his body.

Then he fired at the hand that held the revolver.

As the report rang out Bill Dare uttered a sharp cry and down upon the stone floor of the cave went the gun.

"Ah!" exclaimed the young deadshot, as he bounded toward him. "I reckon I understand now, you sneaking galoot! You are wearing something besides clothing, I reckon. But I am going to have you, just the same!"

Goaded to desperation, the outlaw leader reached for another revolver with his left hand.

Wild felt that it must be done, so he let the muzzle of his gun drop to a line with the head of the villain, and then pressed the trigger.

Crack!

Bill Dare staggered back, and with a groan on his lips, fell to the ground.

Wild knew he had him this time, and he quickly rushed forward and bent over the man, just as he breathed his last.

The boy quickly tore open his shirt and found the steel vest.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, in a satisfied way. "Now I understand fully. The villain! So that is the way he protected himself, eh? Well, the scoundrel had a reason to believe that he was invincible. But he didn't show an awful lot of courage, at that."

Wild now removed the shirt from the man, and taking the mask he had worn, started back for his partners.

He proceeded with the usual amount of caution, for queer things might happen in the Secret Caves, and he was not going to be taken by surprise, if he could help it.

He did not know but that there might be passages and caves under the others, and that the villains could go where they wished.

He got back to his partners and found them busy watching great preparations in the cave.

Under the direction of Rogers, a barricade was being formed.

Blocks of stone were being carried across the narrow part of the cave and piled up, so that if an attack was made upon them they could shoot down the enemy from behind the barricade.

Wild saw what was going on, and he shrugged his shoulders as he thought of Arietta.

But he never once thought that she would not be saved.

Charlie and Joe were surprised when he told them that he had shot the leader of the Death Band.

The noise the villains made with their work had drowned the shots.

"What are you going to do, Wild?" Jim asked, for he was at a loss to think of anything himself.

"Do?" was the reply. "Why, stick at it until we get Arietta free, of course."

"But how are we going to do it? It would be suicide to rush in there and give battle with those men."

"It would be something like that, I guess. But just take it easy. I'll find a way."

"Yer kin bet your life he will, Jim!" exclaimed the scout, who had the utmost faith in the boy.

"If we only knew just where Arietta is we would soon find a way to get her," Wild said, whispering in a meditative way.

"Suppose I go and fetch the cowboys here?" suggested Jim.

"All right; do it. We may be able to make terms with them by doing that."

Jim started off at once.

He had no fears of meeting anyone to stop him, so he hurried, not trying to show much caution.

He went on through the cave, down the steps and out through the other cave, passing the body of the outlaw captain on the way.

The sun had set now, and in a few minutes it would be dark.

When he got to the top of the hill he found that the stagecoach had gone on with the driver and passengers.

But the cowboys, who had been hired to guard it, were still there with the girls.

Jim quickly told the situation.

"How many did yer say there was of 'em?" asked the cowboy called Ben.

"There is but twelve of them, now that the leader is dead," was the reply.

"Well, I reckon we kin soon fix them, then."

"But they are so fixed now that they can shoot at us without being hit themselves."

"We'll find a way to git at 'em."

"I hope we do."

"So Young Wild West has earned ther thousand dollars reward, then?" spoke up one of the others.

"Yes, he shot Bill Dare."

"An' ther galoot had a steel vest under his shirt, eh?" said another.

"Yes."

"That's what I call putty smart in him."

"Well, it didn't save his life, after all. Wild fired three times to kill before he got him."

Jim soon arranged it that the cowboys were to go in the caves with him.

Anna, Eloise and the two Chinamen were to remain at the top of the hill.

Five minutes later they were on their way down to the entrance of the Secret Caves.

Something was going to happen very soon—they were all of that opinion.

But whether Arietta would come forth alive and unharmed or not was the question.

They could only hope that she would.

CHAPTER XIII.

ARIETTA IN CAPTIVITY.

Rogers, the lieutenant of the Death Band, had a better head in times of danger than did Bill Dare.

With the latter it was all right so long as he had been successful, but when he met with the first reverse of his life he became badly "rattled."

Rogers recovered very quickly after the explosion took place.

One of the first things he ordered the men to do was to put the big slab of stone that lay in the fireplace up in the chimney, and block it up with the square pieces of stone, of which there were plenty piled up at one side of the main cave.

While some were working at this job he called upon others to build a barricade.

"Captain Bill went out, an' it's likely he got ketched," he said. "But that don't say that we've got ter git ketched. We've got plenty of grub in here, an' there's water comin' down from ther top of ther cave all ther time. If we go at it right we might git 'em all. Yer all know right well that if we don't do somethin' ter save us we'll either be shot or hanged. Now then, which is ther best, ter die fightin' or to be strung up by ther neck?"

They all agreed that it was best to take the chances of fighting it out.

"All right," said the new leader. "Jest stick ter me, then. I'll show yer that I won't lose my head an' run out an' kit ketched by Young Wild West. If ther young galoot gits me it will be when I don't know it, yer kin bet on that."

The blocks of stone were plentiful, and as one man could just about handle one of them, the work of building the barricade went on rapidly.

When he saw that it was going all right Rogers conceived the idea of having a talk with the girl captive.

He was one of the few who knew just where she had been placed by Bill Dare.

"Keep a good watch, Jake," he said to the man he had selected as his best man. "I'm goin' ter have a little talk with ther gal. If we can't save ourselves no other way, we kin through her, maybe."

"Good!" was the reply. "I was thinkin' about that myself."

"Well, we needn't expect any more damage from bombs comin' down ther chimney, anyhow. That big slab has shut off that sort of thing. All's you've got ter do is ter watch ther doorway there. They've got ter come that way, if they come at all."

"You kin bet that I'll watch, Rogers."

"I know yer will, 'cause it's fur your own good."

Rogers now turned and walked to the left of the big fireplace.

He removed a square piece of stone, and then thrusting his hand in the opening, pushed open a narrow door that was but a slab of stone itself.

He passed through, closing the door behind him.

In a small cave-like apartment sat Arietta, a lantern lighting it up.

The girl was sitting upon a box that had a buffalo skin thrown over it.

She had been placed there when Bill Dare brought her to the caves, but so excited were the majority of the men that but few of them knew just where she was.

From being there so long the girl had got herself in a state of worriment that was akin to fear.

But when the door opened she brightened up somewhat.

When she saw that it was not the captain of the Death Band who came in she showed surprise.

"Hello, gal!" said Rogers, bowing to her. "I thought I'd come in an' have a little talk with yer."

"Where is the captain?" Arietta asked. "I don't know as I want to talk to you."

"Well, I reckon I'm ther captain jest about now. Bill Dare run out when that big explosion happened. None of us knows where he went ter, but we s'pose that Young Wild West got him."

"Well, he will get you, too, before long," said the girl, with much spirit in her voice.

"No!" was the reply. "There's only one way ter git in here, gal. They can't come that way, either. We'll shoot 'em down jest as fast as they show themselves. We've got it all blocked up with stones that no bullets could move. We've got plenty of grub, an' we kin stay right here fur a week, if we want ter. But we won't have ter. Young Wild West an' ther whole bunch will be shot afore that. They'll git desperate putty soon, an' then they'll try ter git in. As fast as they come they'll drop, 'cause my men kin shoot without bein' hit. There ain't no use, gal. Don't think that Young Wild West is ever goin' ter git yer out by fightin' fur yer. He'll only die if he tries it, an' then what'll become of you?"

The tears came in Arietta's eyes before she could keep them back.

The question struck her forcibly.

"Well, Young Wild West is not in the habit of getting shot by such villains as you are," she managed to say, as her courage returned. "Don't think that anything like that is going to happen."

"Well, there is only one thing ter keep it from happenin'," and Rogers shook his head.

"Only one way?"

"Yes, gal, only one way."

"Tell me what that way is."

"Can't yer think?"

"No."

"Well, if we git a guarantee that we'll be allowed two hours ter git away, without no one follerin' us, we'll let you go."

Arietta thought a moment.

"I think that might be arranged. But I can't do it while I am here."

"You could write a note, an' then we might be able ter git it ter Young Wild West," suggested the villain.

"Yes, I might do that."

Arietta saw a chance to escape, and she was quite willing to humor the man.

"I've got a notebook an' a pencil here," Rogers went on, pulling the articles from his pocket. "S'pose yer write ther note?"

"I will do it."

The leader of the outlaws was jubilant now.

He did not care about the girl, so long as he and the rest of the band could make their escape to freedom.

"Untie my hands and I'll write the note," said Arietta. "You surely ought not to keep me tied in this way, anyhow. I am but a child, and how could I possibly get out of here?"

"That's so, gal. Bill must have been crazy ter keep your hands tied like that."

Whipping a knife from his belt, he stepped over and cut the girl's bonds.

It was a great relief to her, for the cruel rope had cut into her wrists until they were swollen and red.

"Thank you!" said Arietta. "You are much more of a gentleman than the other leader was, though that is not saying much."

"I know it ain't sayin' much, gal. I ain't no gentleman; I'm nothin' more'n a low-down outlaw. But I've got some respect fur wimmen' an' gals, though. I always did have. I remember my mother—she was a woman, yer know, an' a mighty good one she was, too. But she died long afore I went to ther bad. If she had lived I might have been a different man. But, yer see, I married a young woman what didn't do ther right thing by me. She thought more of dressin' up an' runnin' around to ther neighbors' houses than she did of cookin' a square meal fur me. Then I got ter drinkin' sorter hard, an' she left me. I ain't never seen her since, an' I can't say as I ever want ter. But I've always got respect fur wimmen, jest ther same. I know ther most of 'em is deservin' of it. Now then, jest write that note."

Arietta was not a little interested in the way he talked. But she made no comment.

Taking the paper and pencil, she wrote the following:

"Dear Wild.—The leader of the Death Band says he will give me my liberty if you will guarantee that he and the rest of the men can have two hours to get away in. I feel that he will do his part. I am all right, so far. Yours,
ARIETTA."

Rogers read the note and nodded his approval.

"Now I'll go an' see that it is delivered to Young Wild West," he said. "Take it quiet, gal. Yer may git out all right, after all. But it all depends on what this note does. If Young Wild West don't agree to it ther boys will be fur killin' yer, an' I won't be able ter stop 'em from doin' it."

Arietta's face paled again.

She did not like the way he talked, and she knew that he was in earnest.

Rogers went on out, feeling that he had about gained his point.

"If ther first note won't do it, I'll git her ter write another," he thought.

The cave was now lighted with a swinging lantern, for it was getting dark outside, and the light no longer came in from above.

"Anything turned up, Jake?" he asked, as he carefully closed the secret door.

"There's a lot of 'em in ther cave, Rogers," was the reply, in a low tone of voice.

"Is that so? Good! That's just what I want."

Then he raised his voice and called out:

"Hello, Young Wild West!"

"Hello!" came the answer. "Are you ready to surrender?"

"Not much!" was the retort. "But I have a note from the girl we've got here that might be the means of settling the trouble."

CHAPTER XIV.

SUSPENSE

It had been a difficult thing for our hero to keep the cowboys from making a rush into the cave after they came there with Jim.

But he managed to do so, and when the new leader of the band called out to him he felt that he had lost nothing by waiting.

"You have a note from your prisoner, you say?" he asked, coolly. "Is it for me?"

"Yes, it is fur you. It was jest wrote a couple of minutes ago, too."

"Well, why don't you deliver it, then?"

"I will, if you give me your word of honor that you will allow me to come back without being touched."

"I'll do that. Fetch the note here."

"Kin I trust you?"

"I've given my word for it."

"All right. I'm comin' with ther note."

Rogers had faith enough in the boy to come out from behind the barricade, and he walked boldly through the arched doorway.

The cowboys were sitting on the stone floor, out of sight of anyone in the cave, but Wild and his partners were where they could get a glimpse of the villains now and then.

But if they had fired one shot that would have ended that part of it, for the outlaws would lay low then.

Rogers held the note in his hand.

It was dark there, and he could see no one.

"Here you are, Young Wild West," he said.

"All right. I'll take it," was the reply.

The boy could see him well enough, so he reached out and took the note from his hand.

Then Rogers lost no time in getting back.

Jim struck a match and Wild read the note.

"It is Arietta's writing," he said in a whisper. "I

reckon the galoots must be getting a little scared, or they would not have got her to do this."

"That's right, Wild," spoke up the scout. "But what are yer goin' ter do about it?"

"I don't know, Charlie. I'll have to think a little."

"Well, I think we kin win out without agreein' ter anything like that. Arietta wrote it because ther galoot wanted her to, I s'pose. But I reckon if we kin shoot out that light they've got in there we kin rush in an' clean 'em out."

"If Arietta isn't somewhere near them, Charlie. If she was she would be apt to get shot in the dark."

"That's so. I never thought of that."

Charlie said no more.

But though Wild did not know it at the time, his suggestion was all right.

Such a move would have been successful, beyond a doubt.

But some lives would probably have been lost.

Wild did not want anything like this to happen.

While they were talking it over in whispers a deafening report rang out from the chimney again.

"Great gimlets!" cried the scout. "Hop has chucked another cracker down, I reckon."

"Yes," answered our hero. "That may help a little."

Bang!

Just then another report rang out.

But very little smoke was to be seen, so our friends knew that the outlaws must have blocked the chimney.

"Let 'em come!" yelled one of them just then. "Yer can't reach us that way, I reckon."

Then there was a silence of about three minutes, and then—

Bang!

This time the report was right in the cave, and instantly it was filled with smoke.

Hop had found a way to get one of his famous crackers there.

He had thrown it through the crack in the rock that formed the roof of the cave.

The smoke poured out into the other cave and set our hero and the rest coughing.

Crack—cra-c-ck!

The outlaws fired a volley from their revolvers straight for the doorway, no doubt thinking that our hero and his men were coming in.

A bullet took a lock of hair from Jim's head, for he had been leaning a little too far out.

"I reckon you had better go and fetch Hop down here, Jim," said Wild, after Jim had told about it. "Maybe he can do more here than he can up there."

"All right, was the reply.

Dart was eager to do anything that would be the means of saving Arietta.

"I guess I had better get a lantern, too," thought the boy, as he picked his way through the darkness. "We will need it, that's sure."

When he reached the top of the hill about three minutes later he found Anna and Eloise more anxious than ever.

But he assured them that it would not take much

longer to save Arietta, as the villains had already submitted a proposition.

When told about the note, Anna said, eagerly:

"Oh, Jim. Tell Wild to let them go. He has shot the leader, and that will be the means of breaking up the band."

"Yes, but they have a new leader now, and he seems to be more clever than the other. I reckon it is a pretty tough proposition we are up against."

"Me gottee one more nicee fireclacker, Misler Jim," remarked Hop, stepping up to him.

"Well, don't throw any more down there. Wild wants you to come down with me. But go and get a lantern first, and make sure that the horses and outfit are kept out of sight of the trail. Someone might come along and take possession while we are here. You had better fetch two lanterns, while you're at it. Then we'll all go down in the caves. I think the girls will be safer there than here, though I am dead sure that there are none of the Death Band around."

Anna and Eloise were glad to go down.

The truth was that they had become rather frightened from remaining up there so long.

Hop was not long in getting the lanterns.

He reported that the horses were all right, and that made Jim feel a little better.

Then they all went down the descent, Jim assisting the girls.

Once in the defile the lanterns were both lighted, and then they boldly entered the first of the caves, taking the two prisoners with them.

Anna and Eloise were awe-stricken at the appearance of the interior.

They could see evidences that the caves had once been the chambers of some temple, or prison, perhaps, for the walls seemed to be of solid rock.

When they went up the stairway, which was so even that it seemed that no such people as Indians of the olden times could build them, they were more surprised than ever.

Wild came to meet them.

"I reckon you did the right thing in bringing all hands here," he said. "Only I think it would be better if the horses and our camping outfit were brought, too. We could camp out here in the defile and have supper cooked. While I am not hungry myself, the cowboys must be. Jim, suppose you and Wing go through the defile and get them?"

"Just as you say, Wild," was the reply. "Anything to help matters along. Has the new leader asked for your answer yet?"

"Yes; just after you left he called out and asked if I had made up my mind yet. I answered that I would let him know a little later."

"I see. Well, if you can't do any better you will have to agree to his terms, I suppose."

"Yes, that's right. But if the galoot will only come out to talk it over with me, without exacting a promise from me that he will not be harmed, I'll soon fix them."

Jim and Wing now started through the defile.

They did not know how far they would have to go to get out upon the trail, but when they finally did get

where they headed for they found that it was about a quarter of a mile.

Mounting their horses, they led the others and soon reached the entrance to the Secret Caves.

They at once proceeded to put the camp in shape.

While they were at it Wild came out, followed by Anna and Eloise.

"Anything new?" asked Dart.

"Yes, I have made a proposition to the leader of the band, and he says he will let me know inside of fifteen minutes what he will do about it," our hero replied.

"What was the proposition?"

"I told them if they would send Arietta out to us they could have ten minutes' start to get away, and that no one but the guards who accompanied the stagecoach would go after them."

"Would you take that up, eh?"

"No; but he might, after he thinks it over."

"I hope he does."

With the assistance of the scout's wife and Eloise, Wing started in to prepare supper for the cowboys.

When it was about ready Jim went in and told them to come out.

He remained there with Wild and Charlie, as did Hop. As he had heard nothing from the leader yet, our hero called out:

"Hello!"

"Hello!" came the reply.

"Have you made up your mind yet?"

"No! You have got to agree to what ther gal wrote. If yer don't, she's got ter die!"

CHAPTER XV.

READY FOR THE RESCUE.

When Rogers said that Arietta would die if Young Wild West did not agree to what the girl had written in the note he did not mean it.

During the rather long wait he had made an important discovery.

He had found the secret door to another cave, which was far more rough in appearance than any of the others.

But that was not all!

There was a flight of steps leading downward, and he felt certain that they could get out that way to the defile.

The villain thought, of course, that our hero and all those with him were in the adjacent cave, and if such was the case they might be able to steal out and down, and get their horses.

That was why he defied our hero.

Though still willing to accept the terms the note stated, he would not come down one bit.

He went in the smaller place, where the captive girl was, and told her that nothing could be agreed upon.

Arietta became frightened right away.

"Oh! if I could only talk to Wild," she said. "I know he would agree with them."

"But yer can't talk ter him, gal," was the reply. "I'm

goin' ter take yer out of here putty soon, an' I want yer ter know you're goin' ter a safer place, too. We're all goin' ter git away from here without losin' a hair, an' don't make no mistake about that!"

"Well, why don't you go and leave me here, then? You surely don't want to be bothered with me."

Arietta spoke in a hopeful voice, for she thought she might gain a point.

The leader of the band shook his head.

"That can't be," he said. "Ther boys won't agree ter that. They want ter chuck dice ter see who's goin' ter have yer fur a bride, after we get away. I had ter give in ter 'em, yer know. I don't want 'em ter go back on me. I want 'em all ter git away, too. If we was ter surrender or git ketched it would mean that we'd either be shot or hanged. No! we ain't goin' ter have none of that. An' I'm goin' ter let ther boys have their own way about you, too."

"After what you told me of your—mother," faltered Arietta.

"Well, that's all right. I can't help it, gal. Maybe yer won't be harmed. One thing about it is that they've all agreed that a real parson has got ter tie ther knot. You'll be safe till we find a parson, I'll gamble on that!"

The girl once more felt relieved.

Rogers went out and shut and fastened the door.

His men were guarding the doorway to the other cave carefully.

"I reckon I'll go in an' have a look at ther new cave," he said, nodding to Jake. "Come with me."

"All right," was the reply, and Jake, glad of the chance, followed him through the secret entrance.

The stairway came up through an oblong opening which was about in the centre of the cave.

The walls on either side seemed to have been the work of nature, which made the cave appear different from the rest.

Rogers went around, lantern in hand, and soon they had looked it over.

"S'pose I take a lantern an' go down an' find out where ther stairs go ter?" Jake said.

"All right," was the reply. "I'll git another lantern an' hang it up there. We've got plenty of 'em, yer know."

He went out and got the lantern, and taking the first one, Jake went on down the stairs.

"Wait a minute," said the leader. "I'll let two of ther boys go with yer. Maybe yer kin git ther horses out, an' have 'em all ready. If yer don't come back inside of fifteen minutes I'll know yer have, an' then ther rest of us will come, gal an' all."

"Good!"

Jake seemed to be glad to have company.

Five minutes later he was going down the stairs, two men close at his heels.

They went on and come to a level about the same distance down as the other.

Then they went along a narrow passage for about a couple of hundred feet and came to the mouth of it, which was so narrow that they had to almost squeeze themselves through to get out.

They all got out, and then they wished they had not. A sharp cry from a Chinaman was heard right near

them, and then before they could get back into the passage half a dozen men sprang upon them and made them prisoners.

It so happened that the passage came out around a bend but a few yards from where our friends had established their camp.

Wing, the cook, happened to be walking that way when he saw the three men come out.

He uttered the cry of warning, and the cowboys responded instantly, even though they were eating their supper at the time.

The prisoners were conducted into the light of the campfire, and when they saw the other two they looked decidedly crestfallen.

"Hello, Jake," said one of the two, who were being fed by a cowboy. "So you've landed with us, eh?"

"It seems so," was the reply. "I reckon it's all up now."

"An' Cap'n Bill got shot through ther head by Young Wild West, too! There ain't many left in there now, I reckon."

"Only nine, pard," and Jake shook his head.

Ben, the cowboy, no sooner heard this conversation than he started to tell Wild.

But he thought he had better find out a little more first, so he came back.

Jake gave in, and he soon told the whole plans that Rogers had in view.

"I reckon that's all right," said Ben. "Now I'll go an' tell Young Wild West. He'll do ther rest."

"Yes, he'll do ther rest, I reckon," said one of the first captives. "He'll soon fix up ther new leader."

The cowboy was not long in getting to the cave where Wild was.

When he told what he had learned the young deadshot was elated.

"Boys, I reckon we must get around through that passage. Then I'll show you how we'll surprise the nine galoots that are left of the twenty," he said to his partners.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

Wild led the way down to the camp.

He quickly talked it over with all hands, and when he had formed a plan of action he said:

"Boys, I want a couple of you to go back and watch when the villains get ready to leave. You can tell by listening. When they go into the next cave, one of you can let out a yell and fire a shot—or both can do it, for that matter. That will let us know what to be ready for. We'll be right there, you can bet."

"I'll be one ter go," Ben declared.

"Me, too," another spoke up.

"All right. Go right away, then. You might call out to the galoots that I say if they don't give up the girl inside of ten minutes we will rush in on them. That might hurry them along a bit."

"We'll do that."

Wild and his partners and the cowboys remaining, save

one to guard the prisoners, quickly squeezed their way into the passage and started for the new cave Rogers had discovered.

They had lanterns, of course, so it was easy for them to quickly reach the narrow stairway.

Up they went in noiseless fashion, extinguishing the lanterns, for they saw that one was hanging from the irregular, rocky ceiling.

There were plenty of hiding places on both sides of the cave.

Wild saw to it that all hands were hidden, and then he waited to hear the signal.

In about five minutes, after all was in readiness for the surprise and rescue of Arietta, a yell sounded from the other side of the rocky wall.

Then two revolvers cracked.

In less than a minute footsteps were heard from a short passage, and in dashed a man, carrying Arietta bodily.

The girl gave a scream as she saw the opening.

"Shut up!" commanded Rogers. "Shut the secret door—quick!"

The door was shut, and then Rogers ran right over in front of the niche in single file.

"Go on down with her," he said, waving his hand. "The rest will follow in single file."

As the man started down the flight of stone steps with Arietta Wild stepped from the niche.

"I reckon you've gone far enough," he said, as he placed his hand on the leader's collar. "If the girl is not released instantly you will die!"

"Hold on, boys!" shouted Rogers, who was badly frightened at the sudden interruption. "Let ther gal go!"

"What fur?" demanded one of the men.

"Because you'll die if you don't!" Young Wild West exclaimed, stepping into full view. "At them, boys!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth when all hands came out, their revolvers leveled at the villains.

They threw up their hands to a man, and being released, Arietta ran and threw herself into the arms of her lover.

The few hours she had spent in the Secret Caves had made her pale and wan, but the joy at being saved quickly brought the crimson glow to her cheeks again.

"Oh, Wild!" she sobbed, as her head lay upon his shoulder. "I knew you would come—I was sure of it. But it did seem an awful while."

"Three cheers fur Young Wild West!" shouted Cheyenne Charlie, waving his hat over his head.

"Hip, hip! Hooray!"

"Hooray! Hooray!"

The cowboys yelled in unison.

When this was done with, Ben came running in, followed by his mate, and then he called out:

"Now, all together for a good old-fashioned yell! Whoopee! Whoopee!"

"Wow—wow—wow! Yip, yip, yip!"

The cave fairly rang with the shouts.

Wild saw that the villains were disarmed, so he led his sweetheart through the passage, Ben carrying the lantern for them.

When the girl was being hugged by both Anna and Eloise her joy was complete.

Two or three times she had been on the verge of giving in, but her plucky spirit predominated each time, and she came out of the terrible ordeal little the worse for it.

It was a few minutes later when the prisoners were brought out.

"I reckon I'll have my supper now," said Wild. "Then we'll light out for Firefly, which is but half an hour's ride from here, so I understand."

"It'll take you a little longer than that with your pack-horses," Ben answered.

"Well, what if it takes an hour or two? I reckon the mining camp is nearer than Santa Fe. The sheriff can come to us, instead of us going to him. We'll have the body of Bill Dare for him, too, and don't forget it!"

Then another cheer went up, and to get even, the cowboys let out their yell.

Half an hour later they were ready to leave.

The body of Bill Dare was tied to the back of the very horse he used to ride, and then the procession set out.

It was nearly an hour before they arrived at the mining camp, and just as they did they found a mounted party ready to head for the Secret Caves.

Why they had been so long about getting off our friends did not know.

There is not much more to add to this story.

Suffice it to say that the sheriff came over two days later, our friends remaining at Firefly meanwhile, and the reward was duly paid over to Wild.

But the boy was of a too generous nature to keep the money himself.

He divided it equally among those who had assisted in saving Arietta from the Secret Caves, including the two Chinamen, for they had both been strong factors in it.

The prisoners were all tried and sent up for long terms.

The sheriff was glad that Bill Dare was dead when he got him, he declared, since it would save the county the expense of hanging him.

Later on our friends heard that the Secret Caves became extinct from a big landslide, which caused the ceilings to fall in.

But they had certainly had enough of them, and it was little they cared.

THE END.

Read "YOUNG WILD WEST SAVING HIS PARTNERS; or, A HARD FIGHT WITH REDSKINS," which will be the next number (335) of "Wild West Weekly."

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SOME GOOD ARTICLES.

"The hardest thing to wrap up," said a shipping clerk, "is a violin. A department store will often test a new wrapper by giving him a violin to do up. If he passes that test he is all right. There is a parcel-wrapping machine now. It threatens to do away with the human wrapper. It can't do up a violin, though. Abroad, bags and string, being expensive, are rarely used, and the young groceryman must be able to wrap potatoes, flour, and all sorts of things, in sheets of paper alone. He gets a kind of knack. He lays his flour or beans in a square of paper, doubles the paper over, and with an end in each hand swings the parcel around and around. Like magic then it is done up, and you can carry it safely quite a hundred yards or so, provided you are careful."

Virginia City is indeed a strange town—a living skeleton. In the height of its opulence it boasted a population of 30,000. To-day there are less than one-tenth that many. Dilapidation and ruin are seen on every hand. The chief streets terrace along a great hillside. Further up the slope are wastes of sagebrush growing in stunted clumps that half hide the earth with their gray twigs and foliage. Down below is a valley where the mines have dumped vast heaps of waste. The entire region is a wild upheaval of hills, and around the horizon are seen ranges of snowy-topped mountains. The only trees are an occasional gnarled scrub pine or dwarf cedar a few feet high. The town streets are rough and dirty, and as one walks about he is constantly encountering old tin cans and getting his feet tangled up in wires from the baled hay. Buildings in good repair are rarities. There are tottering fences and ragged walls and broken roofs and smashed glass, and many windows and doors are boarded up. The search for gold has resulted in tearing the country all to pieces. Everywhere the hills are dotted with prospector's holes. From any height you can see dozens, perhaps hundreds. They suggest the burrowing of woodchucks or prairie dogs. The region along the Comstock lode abounds, too, in deserted shafts.

"Well, I think I'll heat me coffee for dinner," said a big laborer on one of the many buildings now being constructed in Chelsea, Mass., a few minutes before noon the other day. And he proceeded to do so without the aid of fire or even the use of a match. He took his bottle from his handbag, and with it went over to the wooden contrivance in which mortar was mixed. He put about half a shovelful of sand in a corner of the mortar bed, having previously scraped that part of the bed dry and clean. Then this laborer took

a piece of lime about as large as his two fists. He pushed the lump of lime down into the yielding sand, put his bottle standing upright on the lime, banked up the bottle with sand to hold it in position, and was ready for the important part of the job. Dipping about a pint of water from a cask near by, the laborer poured it on the mounded sand easily, allowing it to percolate through the coarse grains. Putting on a little more sand to hold the bottle in its upright position, he went back to his work. In ten minutes the noon whistle blew, and this laborer went to his fireless heater, took from it his coffee boiling hot in a bottle that had at no time been in danger of breaking from the heat, and proceeded to enjoy his homely but hearty meal, all unconscious that he had performed a very interesting experiment in nature's chemistry.

GRINS AND CHUCKLES.

"Shorry I'm sho late, m' dear," began Tippels, apologetically, "but shome fresh jokers stopped me an' wouldn't lemme go——" "Indeed?" interrupted his wife. "Why didn't you take the brick out of your hat and hit them with it?"

"Every bit of food on this table," said the serving lady to Lamson, as he sat down to eat at the church supper, "was cooked by your wife!" "Oh, I don't mind," rejoined Lamson faintly; "I'm not a bit hungry, anyway!"

"Did you know, Willie, that your big sister had invited me to take dinner with your family next Sunday?" asked Mr. Newbeau. "Sure!" replied her little brother. "Ma and pa told her they wanted to see what kind of table manners you've got."

Employer—Did you tell Mr. Boreham, who called, that I had gone to England? New Office Boy—Yes, sir; I told him you had started this morning. "Good. What did he say?" "He wished to know when you'd return, sir, and I told him I did not think you would be back until after luncheon."

"The only news I have to tell you," wrote the Billville citizen, "is that the river has riz an' drowned all yer cattle, an' yer uncle has broke jail; likewise the widdier woman you wuz a-goin' ter marry has runned off with a book agent. Outside of these here things, we air all a-doin' well."

"So you expect to be called on for a speech during the campaign?" "Yes," answered Mr. Dustin Stax. "And it's one that is going to require a great deal of consideration." "It will be a lengthy effort, then?" "No. Exceedingly brief. When the collector of campaign funds comes around I've got to say 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Yes," said Miss Passy, "he's an awfully inquisitive bore. He was trying to find out my age the other day, so I just up and told him I was fifty. That settled him." "Well," replied Miss Peppery, "I guess it is best to be perfectly candid with a fellow of that sort."

"You shall bite the dust!" hissed the villain, as he strutted down the stage. The heroine trembled a few trembles. Just then the hero, disguised as a sprinkling cart chauffeur, dashed down the pike with his machine. That settled it. There was no dust left to bite. "Saved!" cried the heroine.

The Midnight Specter

By HORACE APPLETON.

I am a young clergyman.

I shall call myself Howard Dane.

What I am about to relate actually happened to me; at least, my senses tell me that it did.

I was not asleep and dreaming.

Of course, it is possible that I was mad; but that I should have been mad for just two hours and with nobody's knowledge I cannot believe.

I am, however, so suspicious of myself whenever I think upon the facts that I have never told them to my nearest friends.

I narrate them now under an assumed name, and feeling positive that they will come to the ears of no one who can possibly connect me with them, hoping in this way to be rid of a sort of nightmare that has haunted me for more than two years.

At that time, having a summer vacation, I resolved to spend it in visiting certain picturesque places of which I had heard much, and of which I had never yet looked upon.

And, first of all, to go to a place which I shall call Paradise Springs, though I must not allow you to think that I have given it its proper designation.

It was a sort of quiet watering-place, and there was a large hotel near the springs, but I did not purpose stopping there.

I intended to seek some more secluded lodging-place, where I could dress as I chose, and really recruit my health.

I entered the post-office and inquired of the postmaster whether he knew of some quiet family who might be willing to take a boarder.

At the same time I informed him of my name and my vocation.

The postmaster, a good-natured sort of man, rubbing his chin for awhile, said, slowly:

"Well, sir, I don't know many that haven't their houses full at this season of the year. There's one woman, to be sure, a decent widow, who has plenty of room, and would be willing enough to do for you; but the question is, whether you'd like it? Perhaps, though, being a clergyman, you'll laugh at me when I tell you why; but, to be fair with you, the place is said to be haunted. Old Ganley, who owns it, hasn't been able to let it for ten years; and when Mrs. Ridge, poor soul, had a mortgage foreclosed on her farm and was turned out of the old homestead, neck and crop, as one might say, why, old Ganley just goes to her and says: 'Now, Mrs. Ridge, if you choose to try my house rent free, you can. You can have it a year for nothing, if you can live there that long. And after that we'll talk it over.' And Mrs. Ridge, poor thing, says she: 'Why, Mr. Ganley, I will, and thank you, too; and I tell you more, I'll scour the ghost out of the house for you. Ghosts, in my opinion, Mr. Ganley, are mostly dirty.'

"So the widow went over to the house, and she has kept it clean, and she says that though she hears queer things enough, and sees queer things, too; she's not afraid of 'em; but this summer she's tried to take boarders, and she's had half a dozen come and go. They stay one night; never any more. One of 'em had a fit and one a fever from what they saw, or thought they saw; and so, though the widow would like boarders, and is as tidy a housekeeper and as good a cook as any woman living, her rooms are empty. It would be a charity if you could try 'em—and if Satan is in that house, as some folks say, perhaps you could send him flying, being a clergyman."

"I will take Mrs. Ridge's address, if you will give it to me," said I. "At least I am not afraid of ghosts. If the house

does not appear to be unhealthy I will brave whatever haunts it for a while."

Then, having been told to go straight on until I reached the church, and then turn to the left past the church-yard, and walk until I came to a red house on a hill, I thanked the postmaster and started on my way.

It was late in the day; the shadows already lay long beneath the trees that were set upon either side of the road.

At last I reached the house and opened the gate.

A woman instantly appeared on the threshold.

She was a tall, lean, worried-looking person of middle age, but she had a kind face, and, when I had explained my business, she smiled pleasantly, and answered:

"Well; now, it was kind of the postmaster to send you, and, since you know the ghost story, why, there's no need of my talking about it. I've always had a fancy that if I had more education I could find out all about it. Ghosts I never believed in, and this ain't a damp house built over a marsh. Its cellar is as dry as a chip, and the foundations are all right. A builder came up here one day to examine 'em, and he said so; but I think—I think——" said Mrs. Ridge, rubbing her hands, "that it's something—scientific—very likely, that causes all these things; and when I hear a groan or so, and see something white I can't account for going upstairs, I say that to myself, and it quiets me down."

I bowed.

Oddly as she expressed herself, I knew very well what poor Mrs. Ridge meant.

Natural and not supernatural causes had frightened away her boarders, and proper investigation might reveal the secret.

Perhaps such investigation might be amusing.

Meanwhile Mrs. Ridge lived rent free, and the ghost might be regarded as her benefactor.

I took possession of my room at once, choosing the one that was pre-eminently the haunted chamber.

Then, while my hostess was preparing tea, I wandered out, and without premeditation turned my steps toward the church—an old, moss-grown edifice—and leaning over the railing looked at the quiet graves that now lay in heavy shadow. I did not care to go in, or to read the epitaphs that doubtless gave, as they usually do, unmerited meed of praise to those who, while living, never had their due; but, turning away, I glanced down at my feet and saw that I had nearly trodden on a little exiled grave without the paling.

It was strange that it should have been made there.

Never in my experience had I seen a grave in such a position.

The grass grew thick upon it, wild roses nearly covered it, and stooping low, I read upon the rough, gray stone at its head this one word—Jane.

Nothing else.

No age, no date, no praise. No scrap of verses.

Jane—and no more.

And who was Jane? I asked myself.

Someone too humble to lie amidst her betters in the graveyard there.

Somehow I breathed a sigh for Jane as I turned away from her resting place.

The sun was quite gone now.

Twilight lay gray upon the scene; only a silver line kissed the purple tops of the distant hills.

As I walked on I remember now that several times I fancied I heard a light step following me, but turning I saw no one.

We had our tea in the kitchen, at a tiny table covered with a snowy cloth.

It was a good and comfortable meal.

Soon after, weary with my journey, I asked for a candle, and bade my hostess good-night.

In ten minutes I was sound asleep.

It was midnight when I awakened, with a strange sensation creeping through my veins—a thrill rather than a chill.

I did not feel ill, but I confess I did feel frightened.

The room was almost perfectly dark, but through the darkness I saw a white shape pass and re-pass the foot of my bed.

It was slight and low, but after a little I saw it more plainly.

It bore the likeness of a human form, and it carried something in its arms.

"Am I dreaming?" I asked myself.

No, I was certainly wide awake.

My impulse was an ignoble one, I will confess it.

It was to cover my head with the quilts.

"You shall not do it," I said to myself. "You shall look and know what it is that you have looked upon if such knowledge may be had. It may be that it is vouchsafed you to see what mortals call a ghost. It will not happen again. Make the most of so fine an opportunity."

Resolutely I sat up in bed.

A thought came to me.

The Widow Ridge might well desire to live rent free for the remainder of her life.

It might be worth her while to perform the role of apparition.

But now I saw the figure plainly.

It was that of a woman—or, rather, of a young and delicate girl.

It was clothed in a shroud-like garment, and held in its arms the semblance of a babe.

By what light I saw it I cannot tell; but its very features were growing plain to me.

Its eyes—large, sad eyes, with dark iris—turned upon me.

It mutely extended its hand and offered me something.

I extended mine to receive it.

As I touched it I knew that it was my own prayer-book, open at a certain place.

At that moment, despite all my resolves, a deathly terror overcame me.

Something in the close approach of the figure seemed more than my soul could bear, and I fainted away.

When I came to myself dawn was breaking, and I lay with the prayer-book still open under my hand.

I lifted it to my eyes and glanced at it.

It was open at the burial service.

"You are not well this morning, sir," said my landlady at the breakfast-table.

"Quite well now," I answered. I had resolved to keep my own counsel.

That night, after long rambles in the woods and pleasant idleness under the orchard trees, I retired to the haunted chamber once again.

Was my last night's experience a dream or vision?

I felt it likely that it might be renewed, and I did not go to bed.

I threw myself outside of the counterpane, fully dressed, but slumber overcame me.

Again I lost myself in unconsciousness.

Again I awoke, this time to see a figure, fully revealed as by clear moonlight, very close to me—a girl in her shroud, with a babe in her arms.

She had taken my prayer-book from the table and held it toward me.

Again it was open at the burial service.

This time I took it from her boldly.

"What do you want? Why do you come here? Why do you show me this?" I asked.

And then came an answer, a strange, faint, far-away whisper.

It was this:

"I want you to bury me!"

"To bury you?" I repeated. "Who are you?"

Fainter and fainter still came the voice, "I am Jane!" and the figure vanished.

And now there arose before me a memory of the lonely grave without the church-yard paling—the grave on whose headstone that little name was written.

Led by an impulse I could not resist, I, still keeping the prayer-book open in my hand, left my room, and, going downstairs, unbarred the hall-door and found myself in the open air; bare-headed I walked through the starlight to the grave-yard.

I heard gentle footsteps behind me all the way, but I did not turn to see who followed.

At last I stood beside the exiled grave—and, still obeying the impulse that moved me against my judgment, read aloud the burial service.

At its close I heard a faint sigh, but I saw nothing.

Again I kept my own counsel, and thenceforward my rest was untroubled.

When some weeks had passed thus peacefully I asked my hostess a few questions.

"Who was the ghost who haunted this house?" I asked, "and why was he said to haunt it? Is there a tradition concerning him?"

"It was said to be a young woman's ghost," said Mrs. Ridge, a faint blush rising to her cheek. "The old laws were very strict. Her husband, that she'd married secretly, ran off, and she couldn't prove her marriage, poor thing! and they would not let her lie within the church-yard ground. Her old grandfather buried her and her babe just outside the paling. You can see the head-stone there with her name—'Jane'—upon it. The minister who would not bury her lived here when the story first got about. It used to be the parsonage."

I returned home at the end of my vacation, and heard no more of Mrs. Ridge until the next year.

Then I found that she had prospered greatly.

Her house was full of boarders, whom the ghost never troubled, and she would probably soon be in condition to purchase it.

"You buried that ghost, sir," said the good-natured postmaster, as he finished his budget of news. "I said you would."

"Yes," I replied, "I buried the ghost. I read the service over her."

He may have thought it a most unclerical one, but you, to whom I have told the story, know it was only a true statement.

An Italian went to the civil service commissioner's rooms to be examined for a laborer's position. He answered most of the questions correctly. Finally they asked him if he had ever been naturalized. He seemed a bit puzzled, but at last his face lighted up. "Ah, I know whata you mean. Scratcha de arm. Yes, lasta week."

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